Foretold Yet Unforeseen

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Fandoms:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Cursed Child - Thorne & Rowling
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Characters:	Hermione Granger, Remus Lupin, Peter Pettigrew, Mary Macdonald, Sirius Black, James Potter, Lily Evans Potter, Theodore Nott, Draco Malfoy, Nott Sr. (Harry Potter), Theodore Nott's Mother, Narcissa Black Malfoy, Tom Riddle | Voldemort, Crookshanks (Harry Potter), Albus Dumbledore, Harry Potter, Rose Weasley, Hugo Weasley, Pandora Lovegood, Ron Weasley, an overwhelming number of Death Eaters, Pretty much all of them, Abraxas Malfoy, Lestrange Sr. | Tom Riddle's Schoolmate, Avery Jr. | Severus Snape's Schoolmate, Avery Sr. | Tom Riddle's Schoolmate, Mulciber Sr. | Tom Riddle's Schoolmate, Pansy Parkinson, Daphne Greengrass, Astoria Greengrass, Vincent Crabbe, Gregory Goyle, Millicent Bulstrode, Blaise Zabini
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by unstablehufflepuff

Summary

Be it from word of mouth or from the pages of a book, Hermione Granger has been told this story before, and so have you, but that does not mean that either of you will see the ending coming.

Because this story is not about who you think it is.

*This work has now been made accessible to registered users only.

Prologue

Chapter Notes

> Hello! Welcome! I know the tags might seem a little scary — or just flat-out unappealing — but although this story will get quite dark at certain points, I promise you that it's not an inherently dark fic; there are ups and downs, just like there are in real life.
>
> The appropriate tags will be added to the chapters that require them, but please know that the rape/non-con will only ever be implied and/or referenced, and the graphic depictions of violence pertain solely to the reading material within the story — for example, a book on the Dark Arts or an article published in The Daily Prophet.
>
> Anyway, I sincerely hope you enjoy this, and whether or not you stick around till the very end, thank you for giving my story a go:)

Professor Saul Croaker was the lead specialist on time-travel in the British Ministry of Magic's Department of Mysteries. It was his belief that the longest period of time which may be relived without the risk of serious harm to the traveller or to time itself was no more or less than five hours. Time-related magic was, in his expert opinion, unstable, and grave breaches in the laws of time would result in catastrophic events. Among the worst possible scenarios were a witch or wizard killing their past or future selves by mistake or altering one's life path so drastically that it could lead to temporal anomalies such as un-births.

The most severe consequence of meddling with time, however, was the creation of alternate timelines. It is for this reason that the Ministry of Magic was as strict as it was in its laws regarding the manipulation of time.

Just as the human mind cannot comprehend time, Professor Croaker had written, *so it cannot comprehend the damage that will ensue if we presume to tamper with its laws.*

If there was any one thing that Hermione Granger had learned from her year with a Time-Turner — apart from the glaringly obvious fact that her sleep-schedule was in dire need of correction — it was that the most important lesson on time-travel was a complete and utter farce.

"Awful things happen to wizards who meddle with time," she had been forewarned, but by the end of her third year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, she knew that this particular lesson was — and this was not an adjective her lessons were often assigned — pointless.

Time was a loop: the spontaneous decision to turn back was, in reality, unspontaneous.

When Hermione had brought her best friend, Harry Potter, back in time with her to rescue his godfather from an unspeakable fate, it hardly mattered that she was breaking the law with her meddling, because she had already done it; Harry's godfather had already been rescued by none other than her future self. Therefore, telling someone not to change the past would do little to no good if they already had, and how could one possibly know if they had or not? The individual would not even know themselves.

Some might say that the witch or wizard who invented the Time-Turner was foolish to do so, but, really, nothing anyone said or did could have prevented it, because it was going to happen regardless.

Hermione wondered if Theodore Nott could have been stopped, but, of course, this was an impossibility. He had created a Time-Turner capable of sending one back not only hours but years. The damage it had resulted in was terrifying: an innocent fourteen-year-old boy was dead now, and an alternate reality had very nearly been formed, thanks to the daughter of Tom Riddle and Bellatrix Lestrange. Yet, it would have happened regardless of what anyone said or did; Delphini Riddle still would have made her attempt and she still would have been thwarted before she could succeed, therefore maintaining the timeline.

Divination was certainly not something Hermione prescribed to — the idea of predicting the future would always seem an absurdity to her — but she did believe, quite firmly, that the future was and would forever be unchangeable.

So, Theodore Nott tampered with magical theory and wound up with a priceless artefact: an admittedly ingenious invention with the power to bring a dark lord back from the dead; a Time-Turner capable of mass destruction if it were to fall into the wrong hands. And it had, but time went on, as it always had, and not a single person could stop it. She considered a train moving along the tracks to be an apt analogy; there was no derailing it.

The second Time-Turner created by Theodore Nott —which he had passed on to Lucius Malfoy, who was suspected to have commissioned it to begin with, and who had then passed it on to his son, Draco — was twice as dangerous as the first, largely because it did not take five minutes to activate.

It was instantaneous.

Harry had warned Draco that if the Ministry of Magic were to find such a device in his possession, a sentence served in Azkaban Prison would be unavoidable. Draco had made the right decision by handing it over to Hermione, after all was said and done. Despite being the Minister for Magic, he had known that she would not report him to the Auror Office. After all, Harry had not, and he was the Head of Magical Law Enforcement. In their gratitude, for Draco's significant role in the restoration of the proper timeline, she and Harry had swept the less savoury involvement of the Malfoy family under the rug.

And now, as she stood behind her desk in her grand office at the Ministry, with its Enchanted bookcase, fine mahogany furnishings, and Charmed view of a sunny London skyline, Hermione found herself staring, captivated, at the pendant of a glimmering gold hourglass, lifting the chain high enough to bring it to eye-level. She could not help but admire it, no matter its threat. It felt wrong to destroy such an impressive feat of magic.

Alas, although unchangeable, the timeline ought not have anyone attempting to tamper with it again; it would not do to have other people believing they, too, could go about trying to tweak it as they saw fit. The very chaos that could incite was unimaginable.

With a sigh, Hermione adjusted her grasp and raised her wand, narrowing her eyes in concentration —

Just then, there was a loud rapping on the door; startled, she jumped, the pendant of the Time-Turner swinging backwards to smack her on the elbow. She huffed, annoyed, and lowered her wand.

“Come in!” she called.

The door opened and a head of flaming red hair poked itself inside; Ron Weasley, her husband of two decades and her best friend of even longer, grinned at her from the doorway. However, that grin melted away before she could return it.

“Ron? What is it?”

Ron was gaping, pale with panic, at the Time-Turner.

“Hermione, drop it!” he said, his voice a near-shout. “Drop the Time-Turner!”

Hermione glanced down, and at once, she gasped, her eyes widening in horror; it seemed that her jump had disturbed the Time-Turner, sending the hourglass revolving at a blinding speed. She slackened her grip, intending to let it go, but gravity sent the chain sliding down her forearm, so that it dangled from the crook of her arm —

With an ear-splitting *BANG*, she was propelled into a twisting tunnel of darkness, both Ron and her office vanishing before her eyes.

She could do nothing to stop it, of course, because it had already happened.

Most Promising

Chapter Summary

Aphrodite, set me free
Find a way to let me leave
As the future, it unfolds
I leave the past and turn to gold
— Aphrodite, Honey Gentry

Monday the second of November in the year 2020 was a warm, sunny day. It was, to Hermione Granger, a sign that the storm had passed; a visual reassurance that all was well once more.

Whenever she was now, it was most certainly not that day.

The first sign of this, when she landed roughly on the carpeted floor behind her mahogany desk in the office of the Minister for Magic, was that the wizard sitting in her leather chesterfield chair was Harold Minchum.

The British Minister for Magic from 1975 to 1980.

Understandably, they were both quite shocked to find themselves in this situation. Minchum — who was particularly famous for placing additional Dementors in Azkaban Prison in the midst of Lord Voldemort's rise to power — had his wand raised in an instant. Hermione, too, raised her wand, and the pair found themselves at a stalemate.

She got to her feet slowly, her aim steady despite the panic beginning to claw at her insides. The Time-Turner now dangled from her opposite wrist; Minchum's eyes were immediately drawn to it.

"I mean you no harm, I promise," Hermione told him, cautious. "I won't tell you my name, but I've come from a time when I am the one who resides in this office. You can trust me."

"How do I know you're not one of his?" Minchum demanded, refusing to lower his wand. "One of You-Know-Who's!"

Hermione nearly smiled. There was a very easy way of disproving that; she extended the arm from which the Time-Turner still hung.

"If you lift my sleeve, sir, you will see that that is an impossibility."

"I'm hardly daft enough to fall for that one, not all of his followers are Marked!"

“Well,” she said, wincing slightly, “I am marked, but not in the way you think.”

Minchum eyed her warily for a moment. Hermione waited, reluctant to reveal her arm herself when it meant taking her wand off him. At last, he reached out, but he did not lift her sleeve; instead, he tore the Time-Turner away and tossed it on the desk. Before she could realise his intention, he had directed his wand at it and shouted, “*Bombarda*!”

Too swiftly to stop it, the Time-Turner exploded into a spectacular array of glittering gold flakes and grains of indigo sand.

Hermione shrieked in protest.

“You idiot!” she cried. Finally moving her wand away, she yanked up her sleeve and shoved her forearm in Minchum’s face; the nearly faded scars spelling out, *MUDBLOOD,* glared up at him. “I am not a Death Eater! You’ve just destroyed my way back!”

Minchum had nothing to say to this. He sneered at her.

“I will not be fooled by such trickery! Now drop your wand, I’m summoning the Aurors!”

In a split-second decision, Hermione aimed her wand at his face once more.

“*Obliviate*!”

Instantly, his eyes glazed over. He slumped back in the chair, and his wand slipped from his grasp, clattering softly on the floor.

She shot one last wistful look at the broken shards of Theodore Nott’s Time-Turner, and rushed towards the door, prepared to sneak, Disillusioned, into a lift and down to the Department of Mysteries —

She stopped in her tracks, breathing heavily.

At that point in time, Augustus Rookwood — the Death Eater responsible for the explosion which had resulted in the death of Fred Weasley — was working as an Unspeakable and feeding any and all information that he obtained directly to Voldemort. Stepping foot in the Department of Mysteries would be as foolish as insulting a Hippogriff.

With frustrated noise that was half-huff and half-whine, Hermione changed course and headed for the fireplace. Grabbing a handful of Floo powder from the tin on the mantle, she ducked inside and released it onto the grate, calling out the name of the next best place.

“Headmaster’s Office, Hogwarts!”

In a blur of cool, green flames, she was gone.

Harold Minchum would never come to learn just why his desk was suddenly littered with bits of an old Time-Turner.

In the span of a several rapid heartbeats, Hermione had arrived at the correct grate and was stepping out into another office, and a very uniquely styled one, at that. The towering shelves and spindly tables held the same curious oddities and whirling and smoking instruments which it did in the image she recalled from her youth, with a magnificent, vibrant phoenix called Fawkes perched on a stand next to the desk, and dozens of portraits of previous Headmasters and Headmistresses of Hogwarts School hung up behind it, every one of them gaping at her from within their frame.

The current headmaster sat quietly at his desk, with his half-moon spectacles perched on the tip of his crooked nose. His beard was long and grey, not yet white, but in his wardrobe, the familiarity continued; so painfully in character, he was wearing an audacious set of pale-blue, bumblebee-patterned robes with a matching wizard's hat. Laying eyes on him for the first time in over two decades was more than a little jarring; it took Hermione's breath away to see him so undeniably alive, the pinkness of blood warming his cheeks.

"I'm terribly sorry for the intrusion, Professor," she said breathlessly, after a second, "but I seem to have found myself in a slight predicament."

There was an indignant snort, and she did not have to look up to know that it had come from the portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black.

Albus Dumbledore's only reaction to her sudden appearance was a slight raise of his eyebrows.

"Well, then, do have a seat," he said politely, gesturing to the straight-backed chair opposite himself. "Help yourself to a lemon drop."

Hermione sat down. She spared a single glance for the crystal bowl of candies before returning her gaze to him.

"I'm afraid you're going to be awfully disappointed in me, sir," she said, without preamble. "You see, I had an accident with a very powerful Time-Turner, and I believe I've just given Harold Minchum the fright of his life."

Professor Dumbledore's eyes widened.

"I've erased his memory of the event, so there shouldn't be an issue in regard to that, but he assumed that I was working for Voldemort and destroyed the device that brought me here."

"This is, indeed, quite the predicament," he said eventually. "I presume it was his office that you landed in?"

Hermione nodded her head.

"And how was it that you found yourself in such a place, may I ask? Time-Turners are not known to be capable of sending one to an alternate location. I wonder, Madam, do you work for the Ministry of Magic?"

"You could say that. Where I'm from, it is my office."

“I was unaware that there were Time-Turners with the power to send one back more than a few hours,” said Professor Dumbledore slowly.

“Nor was I, sir. It was created by a future student of yours.”

“In that case, I ask that you do not disclose their name.”

For a minute, he sat in thought, his hands folded upon his desk, neither of them blackened by the Curse of the Gaunt Ring. Still, Hermione tried to not stare at them. The Elder Wand rested within reach, and she tried not to stare at that either.

“I should think it might be best,” he said at last, “if you were to tell me what year it is you have come from.”

Hermione winced. “Twenty-twenty.”

“Oh, dear.”

“Yes.”

“Rarely do I find myself at a loss for words,” said Professor Dumbledore, rather faintly, “but you, Madam, have certainly accomplished it.”

She flushed.

“You say that it was an accident that brought you back?”

“I was in the process of destroying the Time-Turner, you see, and when my husband knocked on the door, I …” Hermione flushed further, feeling downright mortified, “I was so focused on the Time-Turner that the sound startled me, I didn’t mean for it to start revolving.”

“That much is clear.”

She laughed weakly. Her stomach was still twisted and tangled in knots, but she had, at least, managed to slow her breathing.

“Well, if you are indeed from so distant a future,” Professor Dumbledore began, straightening in his high-backed chair, “I have no doubt that you are aware of the current state of the wizarding world. Someone with knowledge such as yours is in a great deal of danger. Lord Voldemort would find you most useful in his search for power.”

Hermione nodded grimly. She did not want to even imagine how much damage-control would have to be done if Voldemort were to seek her out. The paperwork alone would be enough to flood Harry’s whole office, not to mention her own, and his desk would likely become too much of a mess for him to work there at all, until she could no longer restrain herself and finally filled all the paperwork out for them both. Her hand would be cramping by the end of it.

“Which is why I’ve come here,” she told Professor Dumbledore, “rather than the Department of Mysteries.”

“I gather there is a spy among the Unspeakables.” He sighed, a weary sound. “That is unfortunate. Without access to the Department of Mysteries’ collection of Time-Turners, or even merely the minds of those who work within the Time Room, I am at a loss as to how you can be sent back to your original time.”

“What is today’s date, sir?”

“It is Wednesday the second of November, nineteen-seventy-seven. You have come an awful long way from home.”

Hermione released a weary sigh herself.

“I won’t be able to enter the Department of Mysteries for approximately four years.”

“That is both promising and upsetting. Please, do not tell me any more regarding the future. It is best that I remain in the dark.”

Hermione scoffed under her breath before she could stop herself, and promptly dropped her eyes to her lap, sheepish. It was then that she noticed that her left sleeve was still bunched up around her elbow. She hastily lowered it, but not before Professor Dumbledore had spotted her scar.

“That is less promising.”

“For heaven’s sake, Albus, comfort the poor woman!” snapped the portrait of Phyllida Spore.

“*Hush*, *you*!” said Phineas Nigellus.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously.

“You won’t go repeating any of this information to the residents of Grimmauld Place, will you, Phineas?”

He appeared genuinely baffled that she knew the location of his other portrait, she supposed because she was Muggle-born, and so the idea of someone of her kind stepping foot inside his ancestral home was likely to seem inconceivable.

“No, he will not,” said Professor Dumbledore firmly, shooting Phineas a warning look. He turned back to Hermione. “Perhaps it is wise that you remain in the castle until the time comes that you are able to visit the Department of Mysteries. There is, of course, plenty of room,” he added, with a hint of a smile.

Hermione’s heart sank at the prospect of spending the next four years in isolation, separated from her family. In all the time they had been alive, she had not gone more than a few months without seeing her children, and that had only been when Rose and Hugo were away at Hogwarts. Nevertheless, it was perhaps her best option. There was a reason she had come to this office; if there was anyone whom she could trust to advise her on handling this unfortunate situation, it was Professor Dumbledore.

“There are spare living quarters, built for our professors, that currently remain unoccupied,” he continued. “No one but myself and the house-elves would be aware of your presence. If you should have interest, I encourage you to request any texts we have in our library here to be brought to you, perhaps even those we haven’t. I do find reading helps to pass the time, when we wish it to, and most especially, when we do not.”

Hermione opened her mouth to agree, but before the words could form on her tongue, a thought that was equal measures of exciting and depressing popped into her head.

“Unfortunately, sir, there is a group of — shall we say, *mischief-makers* — who would undoubtedly be made aware of my presence and wonder why it is I am here.”

From the twinkle in his eyes and the amused twitch of his lips, she was quite certain that Professor Dumbledore knew precisely to whom she was referring.

“If that is the case, Madam,” he said, “you will have to be hidden in plain sight.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow, waiting.

“How would you feel about returning as a student?”

Her jaw dropped.

“But — but, sir! That’s — I couldn’t possibly — *I am forty-one years old*!”

“That can be easily remedied.”

She spluttered, aghast.

“With a De-Ageing Potion, you could return to the body of your seventeen- or eighteen-year-old self,” Professor Dumbledore explained, “and blend in seamlessly with the rest of the student body. Perhaps, in a year or two, if you are amenable, you could take up the position of the Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, as we will inevitably be without one. Tell me,” he added curiously, “do you have much experience defending against the Dark Arts?”

Hermione opened and closed her mouth several times before saying hotly, “I don’t believe I should answer that.”

With a short nod, he carried on. “I assume you attended Hogwarts in your time, otherwise you would not know me as you do. Might I inquire as to which house you were in?”

“Gryffindor,” she spat.

“Ah … that is nice to hear.”

Hermione did not understand for the life of her what about that was nice to hear, other than the obvious fact that it had once been his own house. Then she realised that, considering the wizarding world’s current state of affairs, it would be comforting to know that the future held a Minister for Magic who was both Muggle-born and a past member of Gryffindor House.

“Now, seeing as your parents are Muggles, I daresay you won’t have to worry about running into any relatives whilst you are here.”

Not by blood, she thought, anxiously fiddling with her wedding ring.

“A story must be made to explain your sudden appearance, of course,” said Professor Dumbledore, “but given the grave period we have found ourselves in, I do not predict that to be so troublesome. Whole families have been disappearing with ever-increasing frequency; it would hardly be cause for surprise were a previously homeschooled and recently orphaned witch or wizard to turn up out of the blue. It has, in fact, happened before.”

It did not do to speak ill of the dead, and so one could reason that it did not do to speak ill towards them, either. Even so, Hermione rather wished to yell at him.

“Is there a particular name you wish to go by?”

“It would not matter if I changed my name,” she said, through gritted teeth. “The aforementioned mischief-makers would have knowledge of it.”

At this, Professor Dumbledore paused, looking intrigued.

“Sir, could I not simply stay at a safehouse?”

“I would greatly prefer it if you didn’t. I hope you can forgive me, Madam, but I believe it would be much safer if you were to remain within the castle for the duration of your time here.”

He did not trust her, Hermione realised suddenly, and she was startled by how sharply this realisation stung. He was going to make her reduce her age and retake her seventh year — again —solely so that he could keep his eye on her. She did not think she had ever been considered untrustworthy before now, and for that distrust to have come from someone whom — regardless of how she sometimes felt about the actions he had taken in the war, especially where Harry had been concerned — she held in great respect, saddened her more deeply than she would have expected.

He doesn’t know me yet, she reminded herself. *It’s perfectly reasonable for him to be wary. Logical, even. Wise.*

“Would it be possible to change only your surname — to choose one similar — and claim that, in their method of discovery, there was simply an error in spelling?” Professor Dumbledore asked. “If you know this group of students as well as you seem to, I fear it would be unwise that they should be allowed to learn your name, for they would surely recognise it in the years to come.”

Hermione sat up straighter, steeling herself.

“Seeing as how I’ve not yet been born,” she said tentatively, “it’s possible that their — erm — method of discovery would prove … inadequate.”

“Do you mean to say that, since you do not exist in this time, you have the power to create an alternate identity?” said Professor Dumbledore thoughtfully, and he nodded to himself, as though deciding this made sense. “When will you come into existence, if you do not mind my asking?”

She thought for a minute.

“In one year, ten months, and seventeen days.”

“We should not have a problem, then. Think long and hard, for whichever name you give me now shall likely be the one these *mischief-makers* —” Professor Dumbledore did not appear able to stop himself from smiling a little as he said that last part, “— come to know.”

Hermione bit down on the inside of her cheek. If she had it her way, she would not bother with any of this. She would simply hide someplace far away, preferably in another country, until the time came that Igor Karkaroff sold out Augustus Rookwood in exchange for his release from Azkaban.

It was embarrassing, really, what she ultimately decided on, but she could not imagine giving herself an entirely new name. Hesitating, she gave the name that her husband called her, most often when it was just the two of them.

“Mione.”

At least it’s better than Molly-Wobbles, she told herself.

“And your surname?”

Hermione found herself stuck on names that began with the letter “G;” even in marriage, she had not given up her surname.

Absently, she glanced down at her wand, still clasped tightly in her hand despite the lack of threat, as if it were some sort of stress ball. Throughout her childhood, her father, William, had brought stress balls home for her mother, only to have Helen throw them back in his face, indignantly declaring that she was not stressed and therefore had no need of them. It remained a lie no matter how often she had said it, for Hermione’s mother had always been a worrier, and so her father continued to buy stress balls, even now in their old age, and he would stand, uncomplaining, while she threw them, because he knew it helped; he knew it made her feel better to just let it all out.

The wand in Hermione’s hand was not a stress ball and her fingers had begun to cramp, so she carefully loosened her grip. It was ten-and-three-quarters long, her wand, with a dragon heartstring core, and thinly carved vines wound up the length of it; vinewood, it was made of, and the name suddenly came to her.

“How about Greenwood?”

“An excellent choice. Now,” Professor Dumbledore said, rising from his seat, “I shall go fetch that De-Ageing Potion.”

“Sir, is this truly necessary?” Hermione tried one last time, looking up at him imploringly. “When I return to my time, I would rather not be only a handful of years older than my children.”

Professor Dumbledore gave her a sympathetic smile. “I am sure, once you explain what has happened, they will understand.” With that, he opened the door and vanished down the spiral staircase.

Sighing miserably, Hermione faced the front of the room again. She could have throttled Theodore Nott for creating that second Time-Turner, had it not been for the fact that it had wound up saving them all from the disaster caused by his first one.

A minute passed in silence before one of the portraits spoke up.

“How is it that a Mud—”

“*Phineas*!” Phyllida snapped —

“— Muggle-born,” Phineas Nigellus continued smoothly, “found themselves in the home of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black?”

Tired though she was, Hermione found it in herself to smirk. “Believe me,” she said, “you wouldn’t want to know.”

He appeared positively stricken.

It was about fifteen minutes later that Professor Dumbledore returned. Hermione had spent most of this time staring at her wedding ring — a simple gold band with a tiny diamond at the centre. Ron had purchased it back when he had still been an Auror, after saving up for months so that, sure of them, he could propose once she had graduated. Not once had they considered it necessary to replace the ring with a proper wedding band; it would be a waste of money, they had decided, especially since they had been saving for a house at the time.

“Here, you are, Miss Greenwood,” Professor Dumbledore said, placing a goblet full of thick, green liquid on the desk before her. “Now, as I am sure you know, most potions that deal with the act of ageing or de-ageing are only temporary. This, however, is a recent and, thus far, widely unknown invention which was acquired by our Potions Master. He is likely to wonder why a small portion of it is missing, but perhaps that is his own fault for boasting about it in the staff room.

“It works quite extraordinarily, I am told. I admit that I do not have much experience with these sorts of elixirs, for they are generally used by wizards vainer than myself, but according to our Potions Master — whom, I shall also admit, is — the effects initiate a minute after consumption, at which point your body will transform into that of your younger self. Whatever scars you have now may very well disappear.”

“If I am to become eighteen again,” Hermione said, drawing another deep breath in an attempt to calm herself, “and to be precise, the version of myself from this time that year,

then my most prominent scar will be gone. Do you know if it will return when I reach the point at which it was given?"

"I should think not, but alas, I cannot say for certain."

She eyed the goblet warily. If Professor Dumbledore truly did not trust her, however, she had little choice in the matter; this was how it must be. Reaching out, she took hold of the goblet and raised it to her lips, then drained it in one long gulp.

It tasted bitter on her tongue.

The effects, as promised, were not instantaneous. Hermione set the goblet down on the desk and resumed fiddling with her wedding ring while Professor Dumbledore waited patiently. He took a lemon drop from the crystal bowl on his desk and began sucking on it; the sound made her clench her jaw in agitation.

Finally, she felt a peculiar tingling sensation: her skin tightened, and her body shrank in on itself, ridding her of all wrinkles and the evidence of having given birth to two children. She was certain that the few grey hairs she had recently acquired were gone as well. The set of plum-coloured robes she had put on that morning and the grey dress she wore underneath were suddenly much too big; she had forgotten how thin she used to be, even after just one month spent starving in a tent, putting together dry rice and wild mushrooms.

"Marvellous!" exclaimed the portrait of Dilys Derwent, clapping her hands in excitement.

"If only such an invention were around in my time," said Elizabeth Burke's portrait wistfully. "Your husband will be most pleased when you return to him."

With a swish of her wand, Hermione Conjured a compact mirror; inhaling slowly, she peered at her reflection. It would be a lie to say that she was displeased with what she saw; it was easier to be confident in one's appearance when going from forty-one to eighteen.

There was only one problem.

"Sir, there are people here who will recognize me when I eventually come to Hogwarts," she said. "My hair is … rather distinctive."

Professor Dumbledore smiled.

"That, Miss Greenwood, I can certainly remedy for you," he said kindly, raising his wand. With a silent spell that Hermione did not recognize, he had Transfigured her frizzy curls into locks of straight brown hair; the process of her curls unwinding caused her hair to lengthen until it reached her lower back. He then cast another spell as she watched in the mirror, and her eyes lightened in colour, now almost gold.

"Perhaps she should go blonde, Albus," suggested Elizabeth.

"No, no, no!" said Dilys. "She has far too smart a complexion to ever pass for a blonde."

Elizabeth looked at her incredulously, self-consciously touching her own blonde locks.

“What is *that* supposed to mean, Dilys?”

“Settle down, settle down,” said Armando Dippet’s portrait tiredly. “Do proceed, Albus.”

Professor Dumbledore raised an eyebrow at Hermione in askance.

“I’d rather not be turned into a blonde, sir,” she said honestly.

“Very well,” he said easily. “Perhaps, then, we shall darken it?”

At her nod of acceptance, he waved his wand, and her newly straightened hair became several shades darker, going from a brown so light that it was nearly golden in some lighting to one the colour of dark chocolate.

“That should do it!”

Hermione lowered the compact mirror to hold in her lap.

“Now, on to your backstory,” Professor Dumbledore said, placing the Elder Wand back on the desk. “To explain both a lack of parents and possessions, I believe we should say that your house was the victim of a great explosion, or even the deathly Fiendfyre.”

An image of Vincent Crabbe falling into a pit of flames appeared at the forefront of her mind.

“Lovely,” she said flatly.

“You would have had a pair of wizarding parents that were responsible for homeschooling you. It is a common practice among pure-blood families. Tell me, do you speak any other languages?”

Hermione tilted her head, considering.

“I like to think my French is acceptable.”

“If asked, then, you shall say that your parents were a pair of *so-called* blood traitors who fled France to live their lives as they saw fit, and, to stay hidden in the event that one of their families should come looking for them, they changed their surnames. You are free to give them more detailed identities if you so wish, but I recommend that you avoid naming their professions, for that could be easily contested.”

“I understand, sir.”

“You shall need school supplies, of course. A new wardrobe, too, I should think. You needn’t worry about funding; Hogwarts is more than willing to provide it for those in need. Given that we are in the middle of the school week, I shall give you a special pass to visit Hogsmeade after today’s lessons so that you may make these purchases. I must, however, insist that our Head Girl accompany you, otherwise your leaving the grounds would appear rather peculiar.”

Hermione frowned. She was quite sure that the current Head Girl was her brother-in-law's deceased mother.

"Is there a problem, Miss Greenwood?"

"Would I be correct in saying that the Head Girl is Lily Potter?"

Professor Dumbledore's eyes twinkled brighter than she had ever before seen, either in this time or her own.

"It is Lily *Evans*," he said, and he added happily, "I believe Professor McGonagall will owe me a butterbeer in a few years' time."

Hermione winced at her mistake.

"Nevertheless, this is good news. It will give you the opportunity to test out your story with someone you know."

She suspected what he really meant was, "test out whether or not you're going to reveal yourself and the future," but remained silent.

"Until then, you will have to remain in the clothes you have on now, though perhaps you should alter them to better suit your current age."

Hermione sighed and stood from her seat. This, she could do; Rose, freshly fifteen, had become very particular about the fit of her clothes and Hermione had consequently been forced to learn several Tailoring Charms. She Transfigured her Conjured mirror into a much larger one and propped it up against the desk. Standing before it, she began carefully shrinking her dress to fit more snugly, then shrank her robes, only slightly, and removed the heel from her shoes.

"Ah, and you may wish to remove your wedding ring." Professor Dumbledore rose and crossed the room. He reached inside one of his many cabinets and returned with a thin gold chain. "This should do the trick."

After a moment's hesitation, Hermione removed her wedding ring, a dull throb in her chest. She placed it on the chain, which she then fastened around her neck.

He nodded in approval.

"Excellent. Now, let us devise a list of classes so that I might create your schedule," he said, returning to his seat and picking up a quill. He dipped it in an inkwell that sat upon his desk and raised it above a fresh sheet of parchment. "Which N.E.W.T. subjects did you take in your own time?"

"Defence Against the Dark Arts," Hermione started, Vanishing the mirror, and sitting back down, "Potions, Transfiguration, Charms, Herbology, Arithmancy, and Ancient Runes."

"That is quite the course load. However, if you managed it the first time, I am confident that you will have no trouble doing so again. There, we are." Professor Dumbledore waved the

Elder Wand once more and the sheet of parchment turned into a full schedule with the name, *Greenwood, Mione*, printed at the top. “I shall introduce you to your Head of House, and then we may visit your new dormitory — or should I say *old*,” he added, winking.

Hermione did not smile.

Her new schedule in hand, he led her from the office, out into the corridor, past the gargoyle that guarded his door, and in the direction of Professor McGonagall’s Transfiguration classroom. They passed no students as they walked, which meant that lessons were still in session. Hermione checked the time on her wristwatch, confirming that it was just past two o’clock in the afternoon; she had only been in this time for about an hour.

When they reached Classroom 1B, Professor Dumbledore went to stand along the wall. She joined him, wondering, as he hummed to himself, if this apparent merriness was an act meant to put her at ease.

No more than five minutes passed before the bell rang; the corridor was quickly flooded with students of all ages, and Hermione found herself subject to quite a bit of staring. For a second, she forgot that she was eighteen again and that they probably were not thinking she was a new professor joining the staff.

The door to the classroom opened and a group of third-year Hufflepuffs hurried out, chatting busily amongst themselves. Only once the last one had exited did Professor Dumbledore slip inside, Hermione close behind him.

Just like the Headmaster’s Office, the Transfiguration classroom looked the same as it had in Hermione’s youth. The only sign that something had changed was Minerva McGonagall’s significantly less wrinkled face as she raised her head to scrutinise them from behind her square-shaped spectacles.

“Good afternoon, Albus,” she said, bemused. She glanced at Hermione, narrowing her eyes, then back at Professor Dumbledore. “What seems to be the problem?”

“Why must there be a problem, Minerva? Can I not simply utilise the break between lessons to visit my friend?”

Professor McGonagall pursed her lips.

“Very well. I have come to introduce you to Miss Mione Greenwood. You see, I am sorry to say that as of this week, Miss Greenwood’s parents are no longer with us. She will be joining your seventh years for the remainder of the school year to complete her N.E.W.T.s.”

“My condolences, then,” said Professor McGonagall, with a thin but gentle smile. She then pursed her lips again. “Of course, it is not as though I don’t have my hands full with my seventh years as it is. I strongly recommend, Miss Greenwood, that you do not allow them to draw you into their mischief.”

Professor Dumbledore made a small sound of amusement and stepped forth to hand over the newly constructed schedule.

“Until recently, Miss Greenwood has been homeschooled. I have tested her knowledge myself and I think she will fit in just splendidly with the other seventh years. She will, of course, need to purchase some supplies. I shall be speaking to Miss Evans about that; the two have been given my permission to visit Hogsmeade this evening after Miss Evans is through with her lessons.”

Professor McGonagall Duplicated the schedule so that she, too, would have a copy and returned the original.

“I suppose I will be getting to know you in the weeks to come, Miss Greenwood.”

Hermione attempted a smile then. She was unsure if she succeeded.

“We shall be on our way now, Minerva. A good day to you!”

A group of Ravenclaw fifth years were lined up outside the classroom, whispering to each other as they waited to be let in. Professor Dumbledore greeted them warmly before leading Hermione down the steadily emptying corridor.

“And now, to Gryffindor Tower!” he announced.

The Mischief-Makers

Chapter Summary

> If you knew my story word for word
> Had all of my history
> Would you go along with someone like me?
> — Young Folks, Peter Bjorn and John

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The portrait of the Fat Lady was most delighted to see Professor Dumbledore. After all, it was not every day that the headmaster visited Gryffindor Tower.

“Oh, hello, Albus! What a marvellous surprise!”

“How are you today, my dear Lady?”

“Splendid, just splendid.”

“I have a new Gryffindor for you. Allow me to introduce Miss Mione Greenwood.”

Hermione stood stiffly as the Fat Lady surveyed her.

“It is such a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Greenwood. Please, do come in!” The portrait swung forward to admit them, and Hermione followed Professor Dumbledore into the Gryffindor common room.

Once again, she was filled with a sense of nostalgia. It had been a very long time since she had last taken in the large, round tower room, infinitely cosy and decorated in a multitude of reds and golds, with its tapestries, bookcases, and study tables, scarlet sofas, and squashed armchairs, all encased by the warmth of a blazing fire, above which hung a portrait of a proud, roaring lion. Memories swamped her, of games of Exploding Snap played by the hearth, of post-win Quidditch celebrations with illicitly obtained bottles of butterbeer, of hiding herself behind a wall of books at the table nearest the window which looked out onto the front of the grounds, and of confiscating the earliest products of Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes.

Several sixth and seventh years who had a free period hastily scrambled to hide anything that they ought not have at the sight of their headmaster; a boy with silky black hair whose tie was hanging undone from his neck rushed to put out his cigarette. Hermione’s breath momentarily left her when she realised that she was now looking directly at an eighteen-year-old Sirius Black.

He was much more handsome in his pre-Azkaban era, albeit with an air twice as cocky. Most notable of all, though, was that he appeared at ease, and it was an ease she had never seen on him.

“I apologise for my intrusion, I do regret to disturb you when you are all so very hard at work,” Professor Dumbledore said genially, with a wink at Sirius, who was obviously not so very hard at work and in the middle of stuffing the rest of his cigarette pack in his pocket. “I have come to drop off a new student who will be joining those of you in your seventh year. Miss Mione Greenwood,” he added, smiling back at Hermione.

She wondered if he expected her to say a few words, but she did not know what, so she said nothing at all. It was fortunate that she had long ago grown accustomed to people staring at her, for the number of people openly doing so now did not so much as bring a blush to her cheeks.

Sirius, however, was looking her up and down in a way that was both unnerving and worthy of a reproving smack upside the head.

“Now, where is Miss Evans? Ah, there you are, my dear.”

An earthly beautiful girl with long, dark red hair and gem-like green eyes straightened up from her spot in one of the armchairs before the fire.

“I shall leave Miss Greenwood in your capable hands,” said Professor Dumbledore, and Lily Evans nodded readily, already setting aside the copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* she had been studying. “I believe another bed will be found in your dormitory. I have already discussed this with your Head of House, and this evening after your lessons have concluded, I request that you accompany Miss Greenwood on a special excursion to Hogsmeade so she may purchase her school supplies and anything else she should require.”

“Of course, Professor. I’d be happy to,” said Lily, rising from her seat. “Is there anything else I can help with?”

Hermione forced herself not to react to the sight of Harry’s mother, nor the sound of her voice, which carried a kind warmth that extended beyond mere politeness. It was not until Harry had viewed the memories of Severus Snape that he had been given the chance to hear his mother’s voice sound like this, rather than hearing only her dying screams; time was cruel to have allowed Hermione to hear this when he could not.

“No, that will be all, Miss Evans, thank you.” Professor Dumbledore bowed his head to Hermione. “I wish you the best of luck, Miss Greenwood.”

Don’t mess this up, more like, Hermione thought miserably as he left the room, ducking through the portrait hole. With a heavy heart, she turned back to Lily.

“Hi, I’m Lily,” Lily said brightly, offering her hand for Hermione to shake. “Mione’s your name, right? It’s cute, I like it.”

“I agree, Evans,” said Sirius, appearing beside them. He had his arms crossed and smirked as he, once more, looked Hermione over. “It *is* cute.”

The first time Hermione had ever seen Sirius, he had just escaped prison and spent several months living as a dog. With that thought in mind, she raised a single eyebrow and gave him a look of complete disinterest; she might have missed him, but sometimes overly ambitious eighteen-year-old boys needed to be reminded of their place.

Lily laughed: a melody no less warm than her voice.

“Tough luck, Sirius,” she said, looping her arm through Hermione’s and turning her towards the winding mahogany staircase that led up to the girls’ dormitories. “You’ll learn to ignore him. We all do.”

“Oi!”

“See?” said Lily, continuing without so much as a backward glance. “It’s easy.”

Hermione could not help but smile at that.

“Sadly, our Head Boy is just as annoying. Well, almost. He’s a bit of a toerag. I don’t know *why* he was made Head Boy when all he ever does is fool around but —” Lily stopped, blushing. “Anyway! This is us.”

They had reached a door labelled, *Seventh-Year Girls’,* and Lily opened it, letting Hermione enter first before shutting the door behind them. Hermione pretended to look around interestedly, as though she had not spent a portion of her life in this very same room.

“It’s nice,” she said.

“Isn’t it? That’ll be your bed there, I suppose,” said Lily, pointing to the four-poster with thick scarlet bedcovers and crimson hangings that sat at the far end of the room. It was the only one not surrounded by a collection of personal belongings.

Hermione crossed the round room to reach it. With an idle finger, she traced the golden thread of the topmost embroidered blanket.

“When I started here, I thought the whole place was rather mediaeval,” Lily continued. “I’m Muggle-born, see, so coming to Hogwarts was my first true experience with the wizarding world — if you don’t count visiting Diagon Alley, that is. But it’s grown on me. I’m sure you’ll feel the same soon enough, especially once you’ve made it your own. Do you have any belongings that are being brought up?”

Here we go, thought Hermione.

“No,” she said, and she did not have to feign her grief, “I lost mostly everything apart from what I have on me now.”

“Oh. Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t stop to think — you don’t mean to say — that is, your parents, are they alright?”

“No, they — er — died, a few days ago.”

“Oh, good heavens, you poor thing!” gasped Lily, swiftly pulling her into a tight embrace. “I’m so sorry, Mione, I can’t even imagine.”

Resting her chin on Lily’s shoulder, Hermione sniffled loudly, making it sound as though she were holding back tears. It was a terrible act to put on, pretending she had lost her parents when Harry had been orphaned following the death of the very person whose arms were currently wrapped around her. On top of that, Lily’s own parents would be dead at some point within the next three years.

“You know, sometimes it feels like we’re all one big family here. Sirius was disowned last year, and you haven’t met him yet, but Frank’s father passed away back when we were in third year. And I know it hardly compares, but my sister wants absolutely nothing to do with me, so I don’t go home much myself. You’ll have a place with us, I promise.”

“Thank you, Lily,” Hermione said, holding back tears for real this time. “That is kind of you to say.”

“It’s the honest truth, Mione. You’re one of us now; you won’t be alone anymore.”

When Lily finally released her, Hermione had to dry her eyes on the back of her hand, careful not to smudge her makeup. She sat down at the foot of her assigned bed.

“We share this dormitory with three other girls. They’re all great, I’m sure you’ll love them. This is my bed here, just by the door —” Lily pointed to a neatly-made bed that stood next to a highly organised bedside table, “— and right beside me is Marlene’s —” this bed was not made and had a Beater’s bat sticking out from beneath it and an issue of *Witch Weekly* lying open on the pillow, “— that one is Alice’s —” it was far tidier than Marlene’s, but there was a yellow brasserie hanging from one of the four posters, “— this is Mary’s —” Mary had a purple teddy bear propped up against her pillow, “— and we share a bathroom with all the other girls that’s just down the hall. I can show you now if you’d like.”

“That’s all right,” said Hermione, taking a deep, steadying breath. “I can find it on my own later.” She was half-certain that her knees would buckle if she were to stand up at that moment; Marlene McKinnon would be dead in less than four years, Alice soon-to-be Longbottom would be tortured into insanity in less than five, Mary Macdonald had already been attacked by the Death Eater Mulciber by now, and Lily herself was practically a ghost in Hermione’s eyes.

She should have asked that she be placed in Ravenclaw House instead, where the worst person she could possibly encounter was Xenophilius Lovegood.

“Do you need a moment?” Lily asked gently.

“Yes, actually,” said Hermione, sniffling again. Her eyes were stinging at the corners, and she could feel her composure slipping. “Thank you again for your help.”

“It’s no trouble at all. I’ll come back in a bit to get you for dinner. We’ll eat early, so we can go to Hogsmeade before dark.” With a small smile and a comforting squeeze of Hermione’s shoulder, Lily left the dormitory. Not a second passed after the door had shut behind her before Hermione burst into tears, gripping the blankets so tightly that her knuckles turned white, the fabric bunching in her fists.

She could not do this; she could not walk about here pretending that these people were not about to lose everything they held dear. Why must Professor Dumbledore not trust her enough to let her stay elsewhere? Why must he put her through this? Had he any idea of the horrors that were to come?

It would be over four years before Hermione could see her family again. She would have to travel forward so that she landed exactly when she left, she decided, otherwise Ron would be sick with worry. He would likely take off to raise the alarm if she failed to reappear within a second of her vanishing and subsequently send Harry into a blind panic. Hermione could picture them both running rampant about the Ministry: Harry would be barking orders at everyone in sight, so engrossed in the task of finding her — so completely in his element — that the rest of the world would cease to exist to him; at the same time, Ron would sink right back into his position as Harry’s first Lieutenant (or second, depending on who you asked, but that was irrelevant) as though the last decade and a half he had spent running Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes with his brother George had never happened.

Meanwhile, Rose and Hugo would be stuck here, at Hogwarts, wondering when their mother would be coming home. Perhaps Ron would not have the time to inform them of her disappearance; perhaps they would find out through an article in *The Daily Prophet*, or be visited by someone else in the family, or even their Head of House, Neville Longbottom, who would pass on the news themselves.

Collapsing back on the bed, Hermione took the chain that held her wedding ring out from under her dress so that she could hold on to it. She and Ron had been meant to go to lunch that day, after she had destroyed the Time-Turner. She rarely had time for such things anymore, but she had gotten her secretary, Ethel, to reschedule two meetings to fit Ron in. They had planned to discuss renewing their wedding vows, seeing as they had both been so young when they had gotten married and neither of them had been entirely sober during the ceremony — Ron, especially.

Perhaps, when she returned, they could still do so. What was he going to think when she reappeared twenty years younger? What was the world going to think? She was the Minister for Magic; everything she did was reported to the public. Even without that title, she remained famous — Chocolate-Frog-card famous, as a matter of fact. Upon her return, she would be two years older than Teddy Lupin, and here she was in school with his deceased father. Could this situation possibly be any worse? She pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes at the thought, but fresh tears still managed to slip past.

Just then, there was a small *scratching* noise by the door. Breathing shakily, Hermione dropped her hands and propped herself up on her elbows to look; a rat had wriggled its way under the door and into the dormitory.

Scratch that, she thought furiously, *the situation has just become so much worse.*

She slowly got to her feet and approached the rat, which was now staring at her, sat on the floor as though it were a person. She drew her wand and, with a Sticking Charm, locked it in place before it had a chance to flee. Resisting the urge to stomp on it, she Levitated the rat into the air and opened the door with her free hand.

The rat squeaked in fear. She smirked before sending it hurtling down the staircase towards the common room.

An injured Peter Pettigrew, it turned out, was just what Hermione had needed to brighten her day. She headed for the lavatory to fix her makeup, feeling notably better.

*

It was about an hour later that Lily returned to the seventh-year girls' dormitory to collect Hermione. This time, she was accompanied by a long-legged girl with feathered, blonde hair named Marlene McKinnon. Hermione had to force herself not to wince as she shook her hand.

"Everyone else is already in the Great Hall," Lily said as they descended the staircase into the common room. "I don't know if Professor Dumbledore told you, but that's where we take our meals. The food here is incredible. It's all made by house-elves, did you know?"

"I did know that, actually," Hermione said sourly.

"The castle is easy to get lost in," Marlene told her, "but we'll help you find your way. The stairs are a right pain in the arse, changing all the time, taking you one direction on Mondays and another on Wednesdays, and then there's Peeves you need to watch out for, the bloody menace."

The three of them compared their schedules all the way down to the Great Hall, and Hermione was careful to stay one step behind so to avoid giving the impression that she knew the way. It turned out that Lily's schedule was identical to her own and Marlene was in about half of her classes; Hermione was going to be spending an awful lot of time with these ghosts.

When they reached the Hall, it was already packed with students fresh from their lessons, eating dinner and yelling at each other from several seats away, because, apparently, standing up and walking over to one's friend to speak with them was utterly unthinkable.

Dread slowed Hermione's pace as, reluctantly, she followed Lily and Marlene to the Gryffindor table.

The second Sirius spotted their approach, he elbowed the boy next to him, who then twisted round and grinned. He had jet-black hair that stuck up in all directions and wore a pair of round-rimmed glasses, but his eyes were brown and there was no lightning-bolt scar to be found on his forehead; there was, however, a different scar that ran down the side of his face, its origins unknown to Hermione.

"Why, hello, Evans. You're looking lovely today."

“Put a sock in it, Potter.”

James Potter gasped and put a hand over his heart.

“You wound me, love.”

“Not your love,” said Lily, rolling her eyes. She sat down on Sirius’ other side — while Marlene took the seat next to James — and patted the spot next to her. “Everyone, meet Mione Greenwood. She’s a new seventh-year and you’re all going to be extremely nice to her if you don’t wish to find yourself facing the consequences of my wrath.”

“James Potter, pleasure to meet you,” James said. He extended his hand over Sirius and Lily, stretching himself so far that his bottom rose off the bench. Hermione did not know whether to laugh or cry as she shook it. “I’m Evans’ future husband.”

“Would you stop telling people that?” snapped Lily.

“No,” said James and Sirius together.

A boy on the other side of the table sniggered, then hastily attempted to cover it up with a cough when Lily glared at him. He had shaggy, sandy-blond hair, bright eyes, and a small, thin scar that started at his jawline and crept up to his cheekbone; a second scar, barely visible, drew a curved line across the bridge of his nose.

“Sorry — er — I’m Remus Lupin.”

Hermione shook his hand happily.

“Mione Greenwood.”

“She’s taking all the same classes as us, Remus,” Lily said, before pausing to rethink this statement. “But I suppose you’re not in Potions anymore, are you? I keep forgetting. Anyway, point is, it’ll be our responsibility to show her around.”

“Hey, I can help!” James chimed in. “I am Head Boy, after all.” He pointed to the badge on his chest for good measure.

Lily resolutely did not look at him.

“My name’s Alice Fortescue,” said a petite blonde next to Remus. She was pouring herself a goblet of pumpkin juice. “Will you be sharing a dormitory with us, then?”

“I will, yes.”

“That’s brilliant! I promise, it’s like a slumber party every night!” Alice told her, beaming with false enthusiasm. “There will be people leaving their shit everywhere for you to trip on, an excessive amount of nail polish, and Marlene yapping at you about her latest conquest while you’re trying to go to sleep!”

Marlene gave her a rude hand gesture that Alice returned without hesitation.

“That’s Frank Longbottom, by the way.” Alice nodded to the boy on Remus’ other side, who had a friendly, roundish face and waved his hand. “And this is Mary Macdonald — she’s in our dormitory as well.”

Mary Macdonald was a mousy-looking girl with dark hair and a shy smile. Hermione thought she recognised her from somewhere, but she could not be sure.

“Where’s Peter?” Lily asked suddenly.

“Hospital wing,” said James, shoving a spoonful of mashed potatoes into his mouth.

“He had a terrible fall,” added Sirius, nodding.

“Tripped on the stairs.”

“Bruised his tailbone.”

“He’s in rough shape.”

“Pomfrey doesn’t know if he’s going to make it.”

“Moony will have to sit his N.E.W.T.s for him.”

“It’s looking like he’ll be bedridden for life.”

Hermione found herself unable to stifle a laugh. What was it they had been called? A double act to rival even the Weasley twins, Madam Rosmerta had once said.

Hermione began filling her plate, her stomach rumbling from not having eaten since breakfast.

“Are they always like this?” she asked.

“Yes,” said everyone within earshot.

“Peter’s the sweet one,” said Lily kindly, and Hermione cringed.

“I can be sweet, too, Evans!” said James. “Just give me a chance and I’ll —”

Alice threw a bread roll at him, and he promptly stopped talking.

“You’ll get used to him,” Remus told Hermione. He took a sip from his goblet and licked his lips. “How come you’ve only just come to Hogwarts? Did you transfer from another school? Lily, what?”

Hermione glanced sideways at Lily just in time to see her signalling for him to shut up. She winced.

“No, actually. I was homeschooled.”

“Really? What made you decide to stop? For crying out loud, Lily, *what*?”

“She’s an orphan, you dolt! She has nowhere else to go!”

A heavy silence followed these words. Remus flushed and looked down at his plate. *Well,* Hermione thought, *now I know who Harry got his bluntness from.*

“Sorry,” mumbled Remus.

“It’s fine,” she said uncomfortably.

“If it makes you feel any better, Mione,” said Sirius, “my parents are dead, too.”

“No, they’re not, you prat!” said Marlene, brandishing her fork at him.

“Well, they’re dead to *me.*”

“He was disowned for being a blood traitor,” Frank informed Hermione. “Also nearly got disowned just for being Sorted into Gryffindor,” he added, chuckling.

“His brother is in Slytherin,” said Alice.

“What brother? Last I checked, I haven’t got one.”

“Speaking of Slytherins,” Mary said, “you should watch out for them. I mean it, some of them are just rotten.”

“Especially Snivellus,” said Sirius, to which James nodded and said, “Cunning little buggers, they are. Mary’s right. Best to steer clear.”

“Good to know.”

“They’re not *all* bad,” said Lily quietly.

“Oh, yeah? How is Snivellus these days, Evans?”

“Piss off.”

“Exactly.”

“The professors are all pretty good,” said Frank, in a not-so-subtle way of changing the subject. “Professor McGonagall is strict, of course, but never without reason.”

“And she’s an avid Quidditch fan,” added James.

“Minnie sends my heart racing every time I see her,” said Sirius, in mock wistfulness. “If only she would give me the time of day.”

“She gives you several times of day,” said Marlene. “They’re called detention.”

“I like Professor Slughorn,” said Lily. “He teaches Potions.”

“He looks like a whale,” said Marlene.

“His moustache is the size of London,” said Alice.

“Our current Defence Against the Dark Arts professor is an Auror,” said Frank impressively. “He’s only been here two months, but I think he might be the best one yet. He really knows his stuff.”

“I’d wager Dumbledore wants us taught by someone with experience,” said Sirius, cutting up a bit of roast beef, “seeing as the world’s ending and all that.”

“The world is not ending, don’t be so dramatic.”

“He’ll be stopped, Sirius, it’s only a matter of time,” said Alice smartly. “Just look at history; no war has ever gone on indefinitely. And besides, You-Know-Who’s got nothing on Albus Dumbledore.”

“He’ll be the one to finish him, I bet, just like he did Grindelwald. And until then, we’ll all just fight on,” said Frank determinedly.

Hermione felt like weeping again.

It was nearing five o’clock when she and Lily left for Hogsmeade, after returning to Gryffindor Tower to dress warmly and pick up the velvet pouch full of Galleons found waiting on Hermione’s bedside table. She had borrowed Lily’s own outerwear, strange as it was to put it on, and now wore a pair of brown western boots and a mauve corduroy jacket lined with cottony brown wool, which altogether just about screamed, “It’s the seventies!”

It was tiresome to walk all the way back down to the Entrance Hall to exit out the big, oak front doors, rather than simply go through the One-Eyed Witch’s passageway on the third floor. Unfortunately, Hermione was not supposed to know about that yet. She hoped to “discover” it soon because the journey to Hogsmeade was much longer than she recalled.

Once they arrived, leaves of orange, yellow, red, and brown all swirling about their ankles and crunching beneath their feet, Lily dove into an endless tirade about the history of the village. Their first stop of the evening was Tomes and Scrolls to collect Hermione’s textbooks; she had to stop herself from getting distracted among the many aisles, peering interestedly at all of the old editions of some of her favourite wizarding texts. Next, they visited Scrivenshaft’s Quill Shop, and she used the money from Professor Dumbledore to purchase a set of handsome eagle-feather quills and a pot of Everlasting Ink. Then she let Lily lead the way to Gladrags Wizardwear.

“Good gracious, I think I might just stay in my uniform,” Hermione muttered as they perused the racks. “Have they truly never sold any *normal* clothing here?”

“Never,” Lily said grimly. She picked up a pair of patterned socks that screamed at her to put them on and let them toast her ten toes (or however many she happened to have; they did not discriminate against the toeless, those socks could be found in the next basket). “I struggle to understand wizards sometimes.”

After much searching, Hermione was able to find a few skirts and blouses that she could alter to make her look less like the Hogwarts librarian, Madam Pince — or worse, judging by the racks on the left side of the shop, Professor Dumbledore — and a young seamstress fitted her for a uniform, which proved to be a very strange experience to repeat after having more recently witnessed the same be done for her children.

“Let’s break for a butterbeer,” Lily said when they stepped out of the shop and back onto High Street, “and then we’ll keep digging. There has got to be a pair of witch’s trousers around here somewhere.”

“I seriously doubt that.”

It was when they entered The Three Broomsticks that their evening abruptly changed course.

“Evans, what a surprise!”

Lily turned to Hermione sharply.

“Is it too late to run?”

“I believe so.”

“Bugger.”

“Why don’t you two join us for a couple of butterbeers?”

After giving Hermione an exasperated look, Lily led the way through the smoky pub to a large booth near the back, where James, Sirius, Remus, and Peter Pettigrew all sat. Hermione was instantly agitated to see the latter in good health.

“I tried to talk them out of it, I swear,” Remus told them as they squeezed in next to him, opposite James, Sirius, and Peter, who had moved seats to make room.

“Don’t lie, Moony,” said James, laughing merrily. “You were perfectly content to come in exchange for a chocolate bar from Honeydukes.”

“You have an iron will, Remus Lupin,” Lily told Remus, her voice dripping with sarcasm. She shook her head, sighing. “Mione, this is Peter Pettigrew.”

“Hi,” said Peter, with a friendly smile.

Hermione merely nodded at him in response. She was grateful when he did not ask her to shake his hand.

“Are you feeling any better?” Lily asked him worriedly. “I heard you took a nasty fall.”

Peter’s eyes darted to Hermione before refocusing on Lily.

“It was just a fractured spine,” he said, shrugging one shoulder. “Madam Pomfrey patched me up.”

“I beg your pardon? *Just a fractured spine*? How are you out of hospital right now?”

Hermione offered to go to the bar and fetch their drinks so that no one would see the slight twisting of her lips as she fought the urge to smirk. She had made it three feet before Sirius was hastening after her.

“How goes the shopping?”

“Abysmally,” she said. “I’m surprised that Gladrags’ clientele does not solely consist of hags.”

Sirius barked a laugh and leaned up against the bar, clearly thinking himself ever so smooth.

“Well, if it’s clothes you need, you’re not going to find much better than Gladrags. You’ll have to look outside of Hogsmeade.”

Hermione could already see where this was going. Thankfully, a twenty-something Madam Rosmerta chose that moment to take her order.

“What can I get you, love?”

“Just going to ignore me, are you?”

“Yes,” said both Hermione and Madam Rosmerta.

“Two butterbeers, please,” said Hermione.

“Will that be all?”

It was then that Hermione realised she was not supposed to have the menu memorised; she looked at Sirius in askance.

“Two orders of chips, Rosmerta,” he said. He flashed Hermione a broad grin. “I think we’ll have to take a trip to London to get what you need.”

“You are aware that the Head Boy and Girl are both sitting right over there, yes?”

“What does that matter?”

“Here you are, love,” said Madam Rosmerta, sliding two foaming tankards across the bar. “I’ll have your food ready in just a few moments.”

“Thank you.”

Hermione paid and walked back to the booth with the drinks, trying hard to ignore Sirius tailing her. Lily looked relieved when Hermione retook her seat, and then very much not, when Sirius opened his mouth.

“So, Mione and I came up with an idea.”

“Bloody hell, here we go.”

“We’re going shopping in Muggle London!”

“Brilliant, Padfoot,” said James. “I’ve been meaning to replace that Beatles’ record Wormtail broke.”

“It was an accident!”

“Come off it, the scratch marks were clearly from a rat!”

“What?” said Lily, bewildered.

“Don’t worry about it, love. Enjoy your butterbeer, and we’ll set off for London once you’ve finished. Hullo, Rosmerta,” James added, all too innocently, when Madam Rosmerta appeared before them.

“I don’t suppose you’re all here with permission tonight,” she said, setting down two plates of chips. She then put her hands on her hips in a way that would intimidate weaker men.

Like Peter, who was now cowering.

“Of course!” exclaimed Sirius, in mock offence. “We’re on special orders from Dumbledore to help Mione here find her school things.”

“A likely story.”

Lily slapped James’ hand as he reached for her chips, then offered one to Remus, who grinned smugly; James flipped him off.

“Oh, they have nicknames, by the way,” Lily told Hermione once Madam Rosmerta had swept off back to the bar. “Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs. Pathetic, isn’t it?”

“Oi!”

“That was highly uncalled for, Evans.”

Hermione smiled and popped a chip in her mouth.

“Don’t bother asking about them,” Lily continued, as though no interruptions had been made. “They’ll just tell you a different story every time.”

By the time that the sun had completed its descent, leaving a cool indigo sky in its wake, the six of them were gathered by the bins behind the pub, outside the reach of the nearest lamppost.

“This is a dreadful idea.”

“What are you on about? Padfoot came up with it.”

“Precisely.”

“It’ll be fun, Lily.”

“Not you, too, Peter! Remus, tell them you’re on my side.”

“I hope you’ll one day find it within yourself to forgive me.”

“For the love of — Mione?”

“As awful a plan this is, I don’t wish for my wardrobe to resemble that of a librarian.”

“That’s the spirit!” Sirius said, taking Hermione by the elbow. “Hold on tight. We’ll meet you there,” he added to the others, and without further warning, he Disapparated.

He and Hermione landed a split-second of discomfort later in a filthy alleyway in some unknown part of London. Rats scattered in their wake, traffic could be heard from the nearest street, and people could be seen walking past the end of the alley, most likely on their commute home from work. Sirius took out a leather wallet that was full of paper banknotes and Hermione traded several Galleons for a large portion of them.

Half a minute later, Remus and Lily appeared with a resounding *CRACK,* shortly followed by James and Peter.

“If we get caught,” said Lily, “I’m blaming it all on Sirius.”

“That’s what I usually do,” said Remus, who then quickly dodged Sirius’ swinging arm. “We’d better stop at Honeydukes before we go back.”

“Relax, Moony, I’m sure we’ll pass it on our way,” said James, winking. He threw his arm around Lily’s shoulders, was immediately knocked aside, and led the group out onto the sidewalk. “Where to first?”

“Well, since we’re here,” said Lily, sighing slightly, “I think we should get her a pair of bellbottoms.”

Sirius wolf-whistled. “Follow me, ladies!”

This time, as they marched from shop to shop, Hermione did not have to play dumb; whether or not she had been there in her time, everything looked different now. In the first shop they visited, both Lily and Sirius gained far too much enjoyment from watching Hermione try on several pairs of alarmingly tight, bellbottom jeans, all of which Lily had to help her into; as it turned out, putting on bellbottoms was a team effort.

Meanwhile, James was perusing the shop’s collection of band t-shirts as Remus critiqued each artist’s music and Peter chuckled along.

“You’ve already a John Lennon one, Prongs.”

“One’s hardly enough. We’ve got the same glasses!”

Remus rolled his eyes.

“Mione, have you got a favourite band?” he called from across the deserted shop. “We might be able to find a shirt of theirs for you.”

Hermione had to think for a moment, worried she might name a band that did not yet exist, then she called back, “Fleetwood Mac!” Growing up, she had often listened to them on her Walkman.

“Give us a little spin, would you?” said Sirius, gesturing with his hand. When she just narrowed her eyes at him, not moving an inch, he tossed his hands up in defeat. “I am trying to be helpful here!”

“You’re being a pervert,” said Lily shortly.

Peter wound up getting talked into carrying both Hermione’s and James’ purchases to the next shop, which sold records and funky jewellery. Hermione and Lily tried on tacky rings while James enlisted the help of both Remus and Peter in his hunt for a replacement of his damaged Beatles’ record and Sirius sweet-talked the Muggle girl behind the counter into playing some Led Zeppelin. After an impromptu dance party to *Black Dog* (which was, unsurprisingly, Sirius’ favourite song), they moved on to the lingerie shop next door.

Sirius was kicked out within the first five minutes for using a pair of lace knickers as a slingshot. James, his target, was also kicked out. Remus soon became uncomfortable and left, dragging Peter with him.

“Honestly, they’re such children,” Hermione muttered to Lily, shaking her head in exasperation. She meant that statement more than Lily would ever know.

A thrift shop that played the same Pink Floyd record on a loop was their fourth stop of the darkening evening. Apparently, it was the same place at which Sirius had purchased his very first leather jacket. He claimed that the experience had changed him forever. James was particularly suave when he followed Lily all over the shop and bought everything that she spared a second look.

By the time they had made their last stop — a small boutique at which Hermione purchased several beauty and sanitary products — Lily was much more at ease than she had been upon their arrival; she even allowed James to throw his arm around her shoulders as they made their way back to the alleyway for Apparation.

It was a peculiar sensation, but Hermione felt younger than she had in years, perhaps because she was. With a job as demanding as her own, free time was practically nonexistent, and had been for many years. She could not remember the last time she had shopped for herself; any new clothing she obtained was gifted to her either on her birthday or at Christmas and Ron had been restocking her side of the bathroom cabinet for well over a decade now.

Another new feeling was the distinct lack of eyes on her: there were no reporters with cameras lurking round the corner and she did not have to stop every time she passed someone on the street just so that they could either thank her for her effort in the war or complain about a Bill that had recently been passed; here, in this time, she was remarkably unremarkable.

“Right, then,” James said when they neared the top of High Street, coming to a stop. It was now a few minutes till eight o’clock, and curfew would strike at nine. “Give us everything you got outside Hogsmeade, and we’ll sneak it in for you.”

“How are you getting in if you’re not coming with us?” Lily asked him, suspicious.

“Tell you what, you agree to go out with me, and I’ll gladly answer that question, but in the meantime … Hand ‘em over, Evans.”

Pursing her lips, she passed him the shopping bags she had been carrying. Hermione dumped her own into Peter’s waiting arms, smiling with sickly sweetness. The four boys disappeared into Honeydukes Sweetshop just before Ambrosius Flume flipped over the “*Open*” sign, and Lily and Hermione made their way back up to the castle under the light of the waning gibbous moon.

“I haven’t a clue how they manage to get around the castle like they do,” Lily said. “Seriously — half the time, they seem to appear out of thin air.”

Hermione stifled a laugh. She suspected that Lily had a difficult time avoiding James, seeing as how he could find her wherever she was. The Marauder’s Map was a true work of art, especially when paired with the Cloak of Invisibility.

“Oh, I meant to tell you earlier. I can make copies of my notes from the last two weeks for you, to help catch you up.”

“Thank you, that would be —”

Just as they stepped into the Entrance Hall, Lily was knocked into by a burly Slytherin boy who was on his way out.

“Watch where you’re going, *Mudblood*!”

Lily, seemingly accustomed to this treatment, merely stopped and looked at one of the two other boys who were following the first out the doors. The one who fell victim to her stony gaze had greasy black hair, sallow skin, and a hooked nose.

Severus Snape blinked at Lily, saying nothing, and then he hastened after his friends, Angus Mulciber and Gaspar Avery.

Taking a deep breath, Lily turned forwards once more and headed for the marble staircase that led to the upper floors. However, whilst she had grown used to being called such a vile word in her short amount of time spent in the wizarding world, it had not been uttered in Hermione’s presence in over a decade.

And she was fuming.

“Mione? Mione, what are you —?”

She dropped her bags on the floor and shoved open the front doors, hurrying after the three Slytherins.

"*Hey, you*!" Hermione strode up to Mulciber, drawing her wand. She had him Disarmed before he could even attempt to do the same. "Learn to watch your mouth, you bloody bigot! *Colloshoo*!"

Mulciber's feet were instantly stuck to the ground; he wiggled helplessly, trying to move them.

"*Expelliarmus*!" shouted Avery, but with a quick non-verbal Shield Charm and an even quicker Disarming one, Hermione had taken possession of his wand, too.

"*Levi—*!"

"*Brachiabindo*!" Invisible chords shot out the end of Hermione's wand and bound Snape, causing him to topple over, landing face-first on the grass. "*Duckifors*!" A jet of banana-yellow light hit Avery square in the chest; he transformed into a duck that waddled around, quacking angrily. She tucked all three newly acquired wands into the pocket of Lily's coat, transferred her own into her left hand, and slapped Mulciber across the face.

"*Miss Greenwood*!"

Hermione spun round to see a sparse dozen students filing out onto the stone front steps, Lily watching nervously in their midst. Professor McGonagall was marching towards Hermione, nostrils flaring.

"Explain yourself!"

The first excuse to come to Hermione was that the frontal lobe of her brain had recently gone from fully developed to not quite there yet; her cognitive skills, which included her ability to plan, organise, initiate, self-monitor, and control her responses, were not what they had been that morning. It would take seven years for this particular part of her brain to once more reach full development, so it seemed to her like a reasonable explanation, but, of course, she could not tell Professor McGonagall this.

Therefore, while shaking out her hand, Hermione said, quite plainly, "They were rude to Lily, Professor."

Chapter End Notes

> Just a heads up: the frontal lobe of the brain does not reach full development until the age of 25, henceforth, Hermione's behaviour will be a little off for a while, especially since she'd already grown used to her brain being fully developed. On top of what's explained at the end of the chapter, the frontal lobe also governs both personality and impulsivity.

Old Sluggy's Favourites

Chapter Summary

They said, "All teenagers scare the livin' shit out of me
They could care less as long as someone'll bleed"
So darken your clothes or strike a violent pose
Maybe they'll leave you alone, but not me
— Teenagers, My Chemical Romance

Chapter Notes

CW: attempted rape/non-con.

Everyone at Hogwarts knew Hermione's name by the time she arrived at her first lesson on Thursday morning. In hindsight, it would have been far wiser to have kept a low profile. To be fair, however, it had been a long time since she had been eighteen years old and she had forgotten about her younger self's slight tendency towards recklessness; for example, setting teachers on fire, brewing illegal potions in school lavatories, dosing fellow students with Sleeping Draughts, and locking them in cupboards, and, last but definitely not least, robbing banks and escaping on the back of a dragon.

On the bright side, Ron would have been massively proud. The entirety of Gryffindor Tower certainly was.

"Mione Greenwood, you are my new favourite person!" Sirius had exclaimed on Wednesday night in the common room.

Mary Macdonald had just about thrown herself into Hermione's arms. "I can't believe you slapped Mulciber in the face!" she had cried happily.

Many of Hermione's professors watched her warily from the moment she stepped foot inside their classrooms. By the end of each lesson, however, they were singing her praises. Again, this was not helping her keep a low profile, but she had spent the entirety of her youth fighting for the recognition she deserved and there was no way she would act less intelligent than she was.

Professor Slughorn adored her.

“I’m not sure if you’ve heard, Miss Greenwood,” he told her in Potions the following Monday, “but I’ve been known to host a few dinner parties now and again — just a few rising stars and myself — and I would be most delighted if you did me the honour of attending the next one. Miss Evans can give you the details. Brilliant witch, she’s never missed a single one!”

The Head of Gryffindor House in both this time and her own, Professor McGonagall, barely tolerated her. It turned out that no matter how good of a student Hermione was, she had already botched her first impression by participating in a duel on school grounds on her first day there. In fact, she had spent her first Friday in the seventies serving detention under her careful supervision. Those two hours had left Hermione nearly shaking with indignation; she was the Minister for Magic, no one should be making her write lines.

By her second week, Professor Flitwick was calling on her before she even raised her hand, merely because he was interested to hear what she had to say; Professor Vector, who taught Arithmancy, beamed when she accepted her first assignment; Professor Babbling developed a habit of reading her work over her shoulder during Ancient Runes; and Professor Sprout regularly applauded her in Herbology.

That year’s Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, on the other hand, came to loathe Hermione. She suspected it was because — due to her presence — students were beginning to question whether he was really the smartest person in the room. Professor John Dawlish (who had only been working in the Auror Office for two years at this point) was treated to several of her most sickly smiles; the trick to wearing them was remembering when he had tried to send Professor Dumbledore to Azkaban in her fifth year. Regardless of how much time had passed, Hermione had never quite forgiven Dawlish for that.

She was grateful that she would not be running into Dolores Umbridge while stranded in this time, for she had no doubt that she would go absolutely feral.

The only other downside to Hermione’s duel with Mulciber, Avery, and Snape besides drawing attention to herself was that she had painted a target on her back where Slytherin House was concerned. Every other day, one of them attempted to catch her unawares and hex her in the back. The other Gryffindors surrounded her as they moved from lesson to lesson, so she genuinely did not understand why they insisted upon behaving so foolishly; it was not as though any of them actually stood a chance. One Slytherin student even sent her a letter covered in Bubotuber Pus (which caused boils to break out on one’s skin upon contact), and yet again the attempt at revenge had proved unsuccessful, for she had been using a Revealing Charm on her post ever since the Rita Skeeter love-triangle incident of her fourth year; she pretended not to notice anything amiss and handed the letter to Peter.

On the weekends, when the students of Hogwarts were out of uniform, Hermione took to wearing her new bellbottom jeans down to the Great Hall, just to make those at the Slytherin table loathe her even more. Had she been this spiteful in her original seventh year? The most likely case was that she hadn’t been, but she was a grown woman now (sort of) and she had not had this much social freedom in years. Plus, the added confidence of no longer having a body responsible for birthing two children undoubtedly contributed to her current outlook on

life; the flexibility she would have when she next saw Ron had her (rather embarrassingly) giggling like a thirteen-year-old.

“What’s got you so amused?” Remus asked her curiously. They were sitting at a table in the Gryffindor common room, working on an essay on the magical properties of the number seven for Professor Vector.

“Oh, nothing,” Hermione said breezily.

Remus raised his eyebrows at her.

“Stop asking questions and do your work.”

“All right, all right,” he said, laughing a little. He looked paler than usual that day. So pale, in fact, that Hermione glanced covertly at Sirius’ abandoned Astronomy homework beside them; the full moon would take place that coming Friday.

Sighing, she dipped her quill in her pot of Everlasting Ink and returned to her essay. She needed four more inches and was struggling to not mention Voldemort’s obsession with the number seven; twice, she had nearly written the word, *Horcrux*.

“Moony, mate, I’ve just had a brilliant idea!”

Together, they glanced up at Sirius, standing before them and panting slightly.

“Do I even want to know?” asked Remus, apprehensive.

“What? Don’t be ridiculous, of course, you do,” said Sirius. “It may even be my best one yet.”

“Talk to Prongs, yeah? If the Head Boy allows it, I’m in. Otherwise …” Remus trailed off pointedly.

“Well, all right, Mr Prefect, I’ll take those odds. Prongs’ll be all for it, just you wait.” And without another word, Sirius bolted up the staircase to the boys’ dormitories.

“I don’t know how you manage it,” Hermione told Remus, although, truthfully, that was rather a lie; she had spent most of her youth looking after Harry and Ron, and after that, Rose and Hugo — and that was not even counting the entirety of wizarding Britain.

“Neither do I, sometimes,” said Remus.

“Your patience is admirable.”

He smiled, and it warmed her to see it. She suspected she might be willing to do quite a lot to make him smile, like the others so easily did themselves, so clearly living every moment to the fullest extent. Remus’ life was already much too cruel for such a young wizard, and from here on, it would only get worse, and those smiles would only get harder.

With this in mind, on Friday night, while Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs were gallivanting about the Forbidden Forest, Hermione slipped inside the One-Eyed Witch's passageway and made her way through the underground tunnel and up into the cellar of Honeydukes. Her initial plan had been to steal a chocolate bar (although the term *steal* was used loosely in this case, for she would be leaving a Galleon in its place) and leave it on Remus' bed in the hospital wing for him to find in the morning. It would be a small token — one that he would believe came from his friends, or even Madam Pomfrey.

Instead, Hermione wound up half-carrying and half-dragging a chocolate bar the size of her entire torso back through the tunnel. She was sweaty and out of breath by the time she staggered into the silent hospital wing. Remus' bed was easily identified by the woollen jumper hanging off the end of it and she set the giant chocolate bar down beside it before hurrying back to Gryffindor Tower for the night, feeling extremely pleased with herself.

*

The following evening was the first Slug Club dinner party since Hermione had unwillingly travelled to the seventies. For the event, she and Lily dressed in floral-printed prairie dresses, determinedly ignoring Marlene's insistence upon jewel tones for the fall and winter seasons. The only other Gryffindors in the seventh year who had been invited were Frank and Alice, who were attending together, and James, who Hermione suspected had only been extended an invitation due to his Head Boy status. Unsurprisingly, James had asked Lily to be his date, but his attempt to do so had, also unsurprisingly, proved unsuccessful. Hermione wondered how much longer Lily would hold out before she caved. After all, their son would be born in less than three years' time.

Other attendees whom Hermione recognised upon their arrival at Professor Slughorn's office included Ravenclaw sixth-year Dirk Cresswell, who would forge his family tree in order to hide his Muggle heritage in 1997, only to be found out by Albert Runcorn and later killed by Snatchers whilst on the run; Eldred Worple, who was a Ravenclaw seventh-year and who would one day attempt to convince Harry to let him write his biography; and Damocles Belby, another seventh-year in Ravenclaw, who had her nearly jumping in excitement, for he would one day invent the Wolfsbane Potion that would make Remus' life slightly less dreadful.

The sole Hufflepuff she knew was Amelia Bones, who would serve as Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement in the nineties but would be killed by Death Eaters in 1996. She and her unborn niece, Susan, would be among the handful of Boneses to survive the next four years. From Slytherin House, unfortunately, Hermione recognised far too many Death Eaters. There was Snape, of course, but also Avery and Mulciber (likely because their fathers had been in the original Slug Club alongside a young Tom Riddle), as well as Barty Crouch Jr, Rabastan Lestrange, and Regulus Black (the sight of whom had her on the verge of tears).

The only other Gryffindor present was a sixth year by the name of Tiberius McLaggen, who would eventually become highly influential in the Ministry of Magic. According to Professor Slughorn as Hermione knew him in her own time, he would regularly hunt nogtails with

Rufus Scrimgeour. She (accidentally, of course) stepped on his foot on her way to her seat at the table; animal cruelty was wholly unacceptable, and far worse when done purely for sport.

"I'm delighted to announce that we have a few new faces joining us this year," Professor Slughorn said jovially once they were all seated at the long table set up in his large and heavily personalised office. He held up his goblet of elderberry wine, beaming at them all. "I propose a toast. To Mr Potter, our new Head Boy, young Regulus Black, the best Seeker Slytherin has seen in a good many years, Barty Crouch Jr — his father is our very own Head of Magical Law Enforcement, you know — and I couldn't possibly forget the talented Miss Greenwood. To your respective success!"

The members of the Slug Club raised their goblets, Mulciber, Avery and Snape shooting Hermione dark looks from across the table as they did. She merely smiled at them, batting her eyelashes innocently. Regulus Black looked on in amusement, which he hastily hid beneath a cool facade the second he realised she was watching him.

"Forgive me, Mione," Professor Slughorn said abruptly, already refilling his goblet, "but I don't believe Greenwood is a wizarding name, is it? Are you by chance *Muggle-born* like the lovely Miss Evans?"

Every Slytherin in the room turned their gazes on Hermione.

"No, actually," she said, cooler than she had intended to. "My parents changed their surname when they ran away together. They were both pure-bloods."

"Oh, but of course!" exclaimed Professor Slughorn. "How silly of me! I remember now, Albus telling me you had been homeschooled. Your parents must have been quite brilliant themselves to have taught you so sufficiently."

"Thank you, sir."

"I was terribly sorry to hear what happened to them," he went on, pausing only to sip his wine. "You have my condolences, my dear."

"I appreciate that, sir," said Hermione mechanically.

"But, oh, the intelligence that must run through your veins! Remarkable, truly is … I presume you have big plans for your future, yes?"

She fought to keep a straight face; he would likely wet his pants if she told him what her future job was. The Professor Slughorn of her own time nearly had. Alas, she could not, no matter how tempting it may have been.

"I am currently undecided, but yes." She smiled, taking a sip from her goblet. "Big plans."

"Splendid! I look forward to hearing more. Now, Regulus, the first Quidditch match of the season is in a few weeks. Would you consider yourself ready to face the daring members of Gryffindor?"

Regulus looked directly at James and smirked.

“It should be a piece of cake, sir,” he said.

James scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest.

“We’ll see about that.”

“Oho! I do love some friendly competition!” said Professor Slughorn, with a rumbling chuckle. “It makes the game infinitely more fun, don’t you agree, Avery?”

“Certainly, Professor.”

“Lily, my dear, will you be in the stands cheering on your fellow Head when the time comes?”

James turned his head so fast that Hermione was surprised he did not injure himself.

“I suppose, yes,” said Lily haltingly, and James spent the next several minutes grinning like a loon.

Snape stabbed his roast beef as though it had killed his firstborn child.

Hermione spent a large portion of the next hour listening to Professor Slughorn bestow unwitting praise upon future Death Eaters, knowing that he would be eating his words soon enough. This ceased to be even the slightest bit entertaining when Barty Crouch Jr struck up a conversation about the recent actions of the Auror Office with Frank. Here they sat, a mere two seats apart, and in a few years’ time, one of them will have assisted in torturing the other into insanity.

She refilled her goblet and determinedly looked away.

After dessert, Professor Slughorn turned on the large gramophone that sat in the corner of the office and invited them all to dance. It was upon standing from her seat that Hermione realised her alcohol tolerance was much lower than it had been prior to her de-ageing. She had forgotten that, at eighteen, she had never had more than a few sips of her mother’s wine. Consequently, she took one step, swayed unsteadily, and then sat right back down.

“Did you make the mistake of overindulging, Miss Greenwood?”

She laughed before she could stop herself.

“It would appear so,” she said.

Regulus dropped into James’ vacated seat, smirking again. She tried to remember how old he was now; he was not wearing a Prefects’ badge on his dress robes, so she could not tell.

“I must admit, I find myself curious about your story,” he told her smoothly. “We all are.”

While most of the Slug Club had gotten up to dance, or else lounge on one of the sofas nearby, none of the future Death Eaters had left the table. Hermione could not have picked a worse time to discover her newfound lack of alcohol tolerance.

“You said your parents changed their surnames after running away from home.” Rabastan Lestrange had taken Alice’s seat without Hermione noticing. He studied her contemplatively. “Why would they feel obliged to take such drastic measures?”

“Were they not proud of the families they came from?” asked Avery.

“Which families were those, by the way?” asked Mulciber, far too casually. He shrugged one shoulder. “Just out of curiosity.”

She heaved a great sigh of annoyance — most of which was directed at herself — and dropped her head to rest against the back of her chair with a small *thud*.

“I couldn’t tell you even if I wanted to,” she said. “All I know is that they both lived somewhere in France. I knew better than to ask questions.”

She knew they would believe her when she said that last part; in her own time, she had learned that the majority of pure-blood boys from families such as theirs did as their parents told them with no questions asked. Those who were like Sirius were rare. Most of the time, it was Draco Malfoy working himself half to death for his father’s approval.

“You didn’t answer Rabastan,” said Regulus. “What reason did your parents have for leaving their ancestral homes?”

“From what they’ve told me,” said Hermione, turning her head to meet his gaze, “their families were a great deal similar to your own. Is that not reason enough to flee?”

Snape choked on his wine.

“So, your parents were blood traitors,” sneered Regulus. “I cannot claim surprise, seeing as you’ve been spending so much time with people like my brother.”

“Based on what Slughorn was saying earlier,” said Rabastan, dropping his hand onto Hermione’s knee, “can we assume that your parents are dead?”

Hermione scoffed.

“You are a child. Hands off.”

Avery and Mulciber roared with laughter. Rabastan retracted his hand, glaring at them.

“And yes, they are dead.”

“Probably had it coming,” Rabastan muttered sullenly.

The laughter seemed to have attracted Professor Slughorn, who bustled over to lean against the back of Rabastan’s chair.

“I see you boys are taking good care of Miss Greenwood,” he smiled. His face was flushed from the alcohol. “Such gentlemen! I daresay you could not find better company anywhere, Mione.”

Hermione took a sip of her wine, trying not to roll her eyes, then realised what she was doing and hastily pushed her goblet away from herself.

“Are you enjoying yourself, my dear?”

She blinked up at Professor Slughorn and forced herself to smile back.

“Immensely, Professor, but I *am* getting a little tired. I think I may leave soon.”

“Oh, I wish you would stay, but of course, I do understand. You work so hard; you must be exhausted. Although I don’t quite like the idea of you walking all the way back to Gryffindor Tower alone at this hour. Perhaps one of you boys could be persuaded to escort her?”

Hermione shook her head fervently, but Professor Slughorn only gave her a patronising pat on the shoulder.

“Your fellow Gryffindors appear rather preoccupied at the minute, I would loathe to bother them. Our Head Boy and Girl make such a darling couple — young love, it’s a wondrous thing, truly is — they’re dancing together now, you know, just over there —”

True enough, James had miraculously persuaded Lily to dance with him and they were now swaying softly next to the gramophone. He looked like he might cry of happiness, and she was twisting her lips in what looked like an attempt to keep from laughing.

“We would be more than happy to escort her, sir,” Avery said, sounding questionably well-intentioned, as he and Mulciber got to their feet.

Professor Slughorn thanked them profusely. Hermione tried once more to refuse an escort, but when they all watched her struggle to stand, she realised that there would be no getting out of it. Avery and Mulciber took one of her arms each and helped her towards the door. Lily and James only had eyes for each other, and Alice and Frank had taken up one of the sofas and were attached at the mouth; none of them noticed her leaving.

Both Avery and Mulciber were chuckling by the time they reached the corridor outside, and Hermione cursed herself for ending up in this situation.

As Minister for Magic, there were often times in which she did not have a place to store her wand, be it a gala or a ceremony of some sort, and to carry it would appear threatening to any foreign dignitaries. As such, she was supposed to let whatever Aurors Harry had assigned to her protection handle any problems that may arise. After living through a war, however, going anywhere without her wand was out of the question. She had been forced to get creative; her wand was currently strapped to the inside of her left thigh by means of a garter belt.

But Hermione could not reach it whilst they were holding her arms.

“I have an inquiry,” she said loudly and without thinking; this impulsiveness would later also be blamed on her underdeveloped frontal lobe. “You see, I was wondering —would either of you happen to have any tattoos?”

They both froze mid-step.

“Just as I feared,” she sighed, her head feeling abnormally heavy. She rested it against Avery’s shoulder, again without really thinking. “After all, your fathers went to school with him. No one should be surprised, really.”

“How would you know that?” asked Mulciber sharply.

It was then that Hermione began to feel terribly stupid; she should not have said that. “I don’t know anything,” she claimed, in an attempt to correct her error. It was, admittedly, a very poor attempt.

“Did your little friends tell you that?”

“No.”

“Hold her still.”

They had reached the Entrance Hall at that point and Mulciber shoved her sideways, right into Avery, who wrapped his arms around her before she could even consider drawing her wand. Mulciber took a step back, raising his own and aiming it straight at her.

“You know, the Dark Lord is especially appreciative of my skill in casting the Imperius Curse.”

Hermione did, in fact, know this.

“Allow me to show you just how talented I am. *Imperio*!”

At once, a feeling of profound peacefulness washed over her; her muscles untensed, her face growing slack, and she slumped further into Avery’s arms.

Get on your knees, a voice told her, and it sounded so nice, so enticing and full of promise, that she did just that. Someone laughed in the distance. *Crawl towards me.*

She did that, too, without a second thought. The moment she reached Mulciber, she sat up on her knees, the cool stone beneath her somehow soft, comfortable. She did not have to wait long for further instruction.

Unbuckle my belt.

And once again, she did not think. There was more laughter in the distance, followed by a furious shout, and only then did she register that not all was right. The voice in her head denied it, suggested that she stay put, but something must be wrong if there was someone shouting —

She toppled backwards on the floor, blinking rapidly.

In an instant, Mulciber was knocked sideways by Sirius and there were a pair of large, sturdy hands grasping her by the elbows, lifting her upwards. She tilted her head back, squinting, to

find Remus peering down at her worriedly.

"*Fucking bastard* —!"

"Are you alright?" Remus asked urgently.

She was certainly rather unsettled, but nothing had ultimately happened, so —

"Yes, of course."

Hermione must have been unconvincing, for he kept holding her, regardless. She glanced towards Avery to see Peter send a Stunning Spell his way, just to have it rebound against Avery's Shield Charm and hit him square in the chest. She struggled to draw her wand, but once she had a firm grasp on it, she shot a Stunning Spell of her own; Avery collapsed on the floor.

"Sirius, move!" she cried, turning her wand on Mulciber. Sirius jerked his head up in alarm; her second Stunning Spell streaked past his ear and struck Mulciber in the face. He, too, collapsed, and she sighed in relief. Both he and Avery were much easier to face as teenagers.

"Bloody hell," Sirius muttered, still kneeling over Mulciber, whose face had been bloodied. He noticed Peter's still form and hastened over to revive him.

"You can let go now, Remus," said Hermione, and the moment he complied, she removed her heels so it would be easier to walk. "Sorry about that. Thank you for your help."

Remus, Sirius, and Peter all gaped at her.

"'*Sorry about that*?'" repeated Sirius incredulously. "Do you have any idea what could've happened just now?"

"Well — yes. Obviously. But it didn't, did it?"

"Did you know they tried to pull the same stunt on Mary two years ago?" said Remus.

Hermione nearly nodded before catching herself.

"You're just lucky we were watching the Map!" said Peter, getting to his feet rather unsteadily, and Remus and Sirius both stared at him in betrayal. "Oh, right … erm … my bad."

"What map?" Hermione asked innocently.

Remus sighed in defeat.

"C'mon," he said wearily. "We'll explain on the way back to the common room." He turned, leading them into a hidden alcove just off the Entrance Hall that Hermione pretended to be surprised about.

“A few years ago,” Sirius told her, “we began working on a map of Hogwarts. We figured no one knew the place better than us. It was James who discovered how to add people to it. Clever bit of magic, that.”

“The Map shows you where everyone is at any given time,” explained Peter. “We were watching it tonight to see if James would finally convince Lily to dance with him, then we saw you leave with Avery and Mulciber and we knew something must be up.”

“I see. Well, he did indeed manage to convince her. They were dancing when I left. It was rather adorable.”

“Why *did* you leave?” asked Remus abruptly. “And with Mulciber and Avery, of all people?”

“I may have overindulged a bit,” said Hermione, embarrassed. She was grateful that the darkness of the night hid her face, for it felt suspiciously warm. “I wanted to leave, but Professor Slughorn insisted I have an escort.”

“Blubbering idiot,” muttered Sirius darkly.

“Oh, I wanted to ask — how old is your brother?”

“I assume you mean Regulus. He’s sixteen. Fifth year.”

Hermione calculated that in her head; Regulus Black died in 1979, putting him in his seventh year.

“I take it he’s joined Ol’ Sluggy’s little club?”

She nodded.

“Figures.”

“This map …” she said after a moment, “do you have it on you?”

“‘Course.” Peter removed what appeared to be a spare piece of parchment from his pocket and tapped it with his wand. “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

He handed it over; Hermione immediately searched for their names. Just as she had predicted, the fourth dot in the passageway they were currently in was labelled, *Mione Greenwood*.

“This is incredible,” she said, upon realising they were all waiting for a reaction. She handed it back to Peter. “Very impressive magic.”

“Mischief managed.” With another tap of his wand, the map of the castle and its grounds vanished. Peter tucked the parchment back into his pocket. “How long d’you reckon Avery and Mulciber will be lying there before somebody finds them?”

“Who cares? I, for one, hope they’re there till morning. Let the early risers step on ‘em on their way to breakfast.”

“Sirius …”

“Don’t act like you disagree, Moony. You hate those two just as much as the rest of us. I bet they’re just waiting till graduation to run off and join You-Know-Who in the fight.”

“Do you want to fight, too, Sirius?” Peter asked as they neared Gryffindor Tower.

Sirius looked at him as though he had grown a second head.

“What sort of question is that? Of course, I want to fight. Don’t you want to see that bastard done in?”

“Well, yes, but —” Peter fiddled with a loose string in his jumper, “— I mean, if you all want to fight … then yeah, I’ll fight. I just don’t reckon I’d be much help, is all.”

“You’d be plenty of help, Peter,” Remus reassured him. He then turned to face the portrait of the Fat Lady, who was none too pleased that they had snuck out, and recited the password after giving her a long, heartfelt apology. Hermione had to be helped through the portrait hole and wound up nearly tripping over her own feet when she landed on the other side. Once more, he wrapped an arm around her waist to keep her upright.

“Learnt your lesson about drinking in the presence of Slytherins, have you?”

“Most definitely,” said Hermione solemnly. “Never again.” An image of Andromeda Tonks and herself overindulging in some elderberry wine at Harry and Ginny’s annual New Year’s Eve party appeared unbidden at the forefront of her mind, and she grimaced; she had mortified Rose that night by stumbling over a chair and nearly upending a table — in fairness, though, Andromeda had managed to start a small fire that Seamus Finnigan, as a member of the Official Fire Broomgade, had been forced to put out.

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.” Sirius barked out a laugh, just as Hermione dropped her heels by the hearth and plopped herself down on the sofa, Remus at her side. “Prongs is living his dream right now. Merlin’s saggy bullocks, he’s going to be insufferable.”

Peter peered at the Map over his shoulder, gaping.

“They’re *still* dancing.”

“Looks like Frank and Alice have retreated for some alone time. Potions’ storeroom. Very classy.”

Remus sniggered.

“I don’t reckon you’re in any position to judge, Padfoot.”

Sirius strode over, casually kicking him in the shin as he passed, and dropped down onto the adjacent armchair, spreading out on it as though it were a throne. Peter sat down at his feet, as if a humble servant, and Hermione found herself scoffing at the sight.

“She’s pissed, eh?” said Sirius, smirking.

“*She* is rather inebriated, yes,” she said primly. “It is an unfortunate side effect of alcohol consumption.”

Sirius snorted. He looked back at the Map.

“Party’s over, looks like. Everyone’s leaving now. Mulciber and Avery are still in the Entrance Hall,” he added, with a wicked grin.

Hermione stared at him, feeling the blood suddenly drain from her face; Harry and Ron would have been like this if it were Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle left unconscious for someone else to find. In fact, they really had, and she had helped, too. It seemed so simple now; it had started out as nothing more than house rivalry, but it would keep getting worse and worse until they were facing off in battle. Sirius, Remus, and Peter may have had an inkling of the threat that Mulciber and Avery posed because of what had happened to Mary, but, in reality, they had seen nothing yet. Hermione knew, better than any of them, just how precarious a position she had been in that night. It almost didn’t matter that Avery and Mulciber were younger than the last time she had faced them; they were still dangerous.

And yet, she had failed to take them seriously. She had been enjoying herself, despite all the terrible things going on outside the castle walls, and despite all the terrible things that would eventually happen within them. It was easy to get used to peacetime — too easy. She may have remained prepared for something to go wrong, but the fact of the matter was, she was not on guard anymore.

When her nephew, Albus Severus, had gone missing with Scorpius Malfoy, it had been the cause of a massive shock, because even though some part of Hermione had known bad things would continue to happen even without a war being fought, she had not seen it coming. She had been too comfortable, too lax, and Albus and Scorpius had managed to break into her office right under her nose to steal the original Time-Turner. She was getting too comfortable again, here in this decade, and that had to stop.

She had to return to her family in one piece.

“All right, Mione?”

Hermione glanced sideways at Remus, who was looking at her worriedly again. He had his arm around her shoulders, and she had been too lost in thought to notice.

“I’ll be fine,” she said, and she gave him a reassuring smile, just as a small voice inside her head added, *but none of you will.*

Eyes Everywhere

Chapter Summary

There's something happening here
But what it is ain't exactly clear
There's a man with a gun over there
A-telling me I got to beware
I think it's time we stop
Children, what's that sound?
Everybody look what's going down
— For What It's Worth, Buffalo Springfield

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Throughout the weeks that followed, Hermione spent a lot of time in the Hogwarts library. Often, she was joined by Remus, Lily and Mary, the latter of whom, it turned out, normally went to Lily for help with her assignments. Remus, on the other hand, studied with Lily because, unlike his other friends, she need not be dragged screaming to the library.

It was not that Hermione thought she really needed the study time. Truthfully, this was probably the last thing she needed — she was decades ahead of her classmates — but they did not know this; if she was going to excel, which she undoubtedly was, some time spent in the library would make that more believable. After all, she could not simply write all her assignments without so much as referencing the assigned material. People would question that, and she did not want people asking questions.

Being in the library was also helpful in terms of avoiding certain members of Slytherin House, all of whom seemed to be looking at her rather oddly as of late.

“Argh! I still have pumpkin juice in my hair!” a fifth-year Slytherin exclaimed from the next table, her face scrunched up in disgust. “I swear, one of these days, Black will get what’s coming to him.”

Yet another advantage was that Hermione was not present when Sirius inevitably blew things up, such as the jugs of pumpkin juice on the Slytherin table in the Great Hall at lunch that day.

Lily sighed, watching the fifth-year attempt to cast a Scouring Charm on her hair, only to wind up with soap dripping from its ends and onto her skirt.

“I’d offer to help,” Lily said, “but she and her friends made a big fuss over having a Muggle-born as their Head Girl. I say let her suffer.”

Mary nodded her head solemnly.

“It was rather spectacular, actually,” Remus said, smiling at Hermione. “You should have seen the look on McGonagall’s face. I thought she’d surely hex Sirius.”

“I wouldn’t blame her,” murmured Hermione.

Chuckling, he reached down into his bag and took out an alarmingly large piece of chocolate. Lily and Mary both gaped at him as he broke off a chunk and popped it in his mouth.

“Where on earth did you find a chocolate bar that size?”

Remus shrugged, swallowing.

“Found it.”

Lily raised her eyebrows incredulously.

“It was on my bed.”

“Do you make it a habit of eating misplaced sweets?”

“Only when it’s chocolate.”

“It would be really easy to poison you, you realise.”

“Lily!” Mary gasped, aghast. “That’s terrible!”

Hermione laughed softly, mindful of Madam Pince lurking a few shelves away, and added the date to the top of her Transfiguration essay before setting it aside and starting on the one for Potions.

“Chocolate is sacred,” Remus said, very matter-of-factly. “No one would dare poison it. To do so would be a crime against humanity.”

Thoughts of Romilda Vane and Love Potions swirled around in Hermione’s head, and she laughed again, shaking her head.

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that, Remus,” she said.

Remus glanced sideways at her. “Is there something you’re trying to tell me, Mione?” He lowered his voice, putting on a look of feigned horror. “Have you poisoned my chocolate?”

Hermione pressed a hand to her chest.

“How did you know?”

“I’ve been feeling awfully out of sorts ever since I started eating it. You see, I simply cannot bear being apart from you. It was Amortentia, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Remus. Please, forgive me, I just couldn’t help myself!”

Lily snorted softly, just as Madam Pince appeared to hiss at them all to be quiet. Remus hastily hid his chocolate bar under the table and Mary had to stuff her fist in her mouth to stifle her giggling."

"Lily's right, though, you know," Hermione whispered the moment Madam Pince was gone; "it would be really easy to poison you."

Remus just shrugged and ate another chunk of chocolate.

"*Moony*! Are you *eating* in the *library*?"

All four of them looked up, equally taken aback, to see James standing before them, staring at Remus in apparent amazement.

"I should take points from you," he said. "That'd be what a good Head Boy would do in this situation."

"And you're a good Head Boy, are you?" said Lily coolly.

"I could be good for you, Evans," said James sweetly.

The fifth-year at the next table feigned vomiting.

"Two points from Slytherin for eavesdropping!"

"Potter, for heaven's sake, lower your voice!" Lily snapped, as James took the only remaining seat at their table, ignoring the venomous look the fifth-year was shooting him. "You're in a library!"

"Really? I hadn't noticed." He dropped his bag on the table with a *thud* that made Mary startle, blinking rapidly. "So, what are we working on?"

"You're … you're here to study?"

"Why else would I be here?"

Lily squirmed a bit in her seat, not meeting his gaze.

"What — did you think I came just to see you?"

"Of course not," she said, looking flustered.

James leaned forward, grinning.

"Then why are you blushing?" he asked softly.

"You must be imagining things. Honestly, you ought to see Madam Pomfrey to get your head checked." With a small huff, Lily dipped her quill in her inkwell and determinedly returned to her Transfiguration essay.

James sat back, appearing awfully pleased with himself. He took out his things and spread them on the table, getting to work without another word. Lily continued to eye him covertly, but, true to his word, he kept on studying. The pink tinge in her cheeks lingered for the next two hours and she was smiling as they left for dinner, although, when Mary asked, she refused to explain why.

"Ah, Prongs, Moony, my friends!" Sirius cried as they joined Peter, Marlene, and himself at the Gryffindor table. "Thank goodness. McGonagall keeps glaring and since you're here now, there'll be less attention on me."

Marlene raised an eyebrow.

"Since when do you not want attention on yourself?"

Sirius opened his mouth to reply, then closed it, appearing to think hard about that.

Lily dropped onto the seat beside Marlene and the two promptly began whispering to each other.

"Did you really do it, James?" Peter asked, in a hushed voice.

James nodded impressively.

Peter looked at him in awe.

"Do what?" asked Sirius.

"Go to the library! *To study*!"

"Oh, that," said Remus. "Yes, it seemed he did."

"There's no need to sound so surprised," said James, affronted. "I'll have you know that I am an excellent student. There's a reason Dumbledore made me Head Boy, you know."

"Indeed, Prongs, and we're still trying to sort it out," said Sirius, who then winced, and Hermione suspected James had just kicked him under the table. "There's no need to get vi—oh, hell. Snivellus is staring again."

Hermione, James, and Remus all twisted round to see Snape watching them from the Slytherin table at the other end of the Hall.

"Poor sod," muttered James, shaking his head in mock sympathy. "You'd think he'd have gotten the hint by now. Evans wants nothing to do with him."

He and Remus turned back to Sirius, but Hermione's focus stayed on Snape. He narrowed his eyes at her, a calculating look on his sallow face.

No, she thought, *he's not staring at Lily at all.*

After a moment, Snape glanced away to mutter something to Avery and their friend Ivan Wilkes, another either future or current Death Eater, who would die in 1980. Avery nodded gravely, and then he and Wilkes, too, were staring at Hermione. She fought the urge to shudder and turned back to the conversation.

"You wish," Marlene was saying haughtily, looking down her nose at Sirius, who had his head propped up on his hand.

"C'mon, Marlene. We both know you adore me."

Marlene stood from the table with a huff and walked away, swinging her hips. Sirius chased after her, reminding Hermione of a dog with a bone. She looked at Remus in askance.

"They've got a bit of an on again, off again …" He paused, frowning. "I dunno if *relationship* is the right word, actually."

James sniggered, shovelling a spoonful of mashed potatoes in his mouth.

"Definitely not," said Peter firmly. He then proceeded to set his elbow down on the rim of his plate, accidentally overturning it and sending its contents flying; Mary yelped, holding her hands up to shield herself, and he turned bright red as everyone laughed.

"I think I ought to head back to the library after this," Remus told Hermione, still chortling slightly. "I still have a few inches left in my Transfiguration essay."

"I'll join you," she said, nodding, and a few minutes later, they both made to leave, only to be stopped by Professor Dumbledore on his way to the head table.

"Miss Greenwood," he said warmly, his hands clasped behind his back. "I was hoping to run into you. I trust you have been settling in well?"

"I have, sir," said Hermione. "Everyone has been very welcoming."

"I'm glad. Well, should you run into any trouble, my door is always open." And with that, Professor Dumbledore glided away, humming a pleasant tune.

As she was returning her gaze to Remus, she caught sight of Snape once more; he and Avery were staring again. Stiffening, she looped her arm through Remus' and quickly led him out into the Entrance Hall.

"They're probably just wondering how you fought off Mulciber's Imperius Curse," Remus said in an undertone, as they approached the marble staircase.

Hermione looked up at him in surprise.

"I don't think I fought it off, really," she said. "It's far more likely that he got distracted with you three showing up."

Remus frowned thoughtfully. "I think once you've got a firm grasp on the curse, losing concentration shouldn't be a problem. I mean, people have been under it for years at a time,

haven't they? I don't claim to be an expert on the subject but … assuming you did fight it off, that's very impressive."

Hermione smiled at him. "Well, if that is the case, then thank you."

"No thanks necessary," he said, waving his free hand dismissively. "I'm still under your Love Potion, remember? Speaking without complimenting you would be a waste of breath."

She giggled before she could stop herself, then wondered if being prone to fits of giggles was a side-effect of the De-Ageing Potion.

When the pair of them returned to their table in the library, Remus sat down opposite her and extended his legs so that his feet were caging in her own. For a while, they worked in silence, and Hermione found herself twirling the chain around her neck as she wrote, listing all the necessary ingredients for Polyjuice Potion. Simply holding her wedding ring in her hand made her feel better — a little lighter, even. She should have expected Remus to notice eventually.

"Whose ring is that?" he asked, curious. "Did it belong to your mother?"

Hermione stilled, thinking quickly.

"No," she said finally. "It's a promise ring. A little old-fashioned, I know, but …" She shrugged, smiling sadly.

"Have you got a boyfriend back home, then?" said Remus, drawing his feet back towards himself.

"No, he … he was actually over for dinner when …" Hermione blinked rapidly, looking back down at her homework, and feeling rather silly for letting a lie bring her to the verge of tears. She settled for a partial truth; lies were more believable if they had a grain of truth in them. "I'd just gone out to get us another bottle of wine. We'd only had red, and my mother was very adamant about needing white if we were to have fish. Red wine is for red meat, she said, or pasta, depending on the sauce. But you needed white wine for seafood."

"I'm sorry," said Remus quietly.

She nodded, sniffling a little, and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"What was his name? Your boyfriend."

"Bilius," she said, after a second. "We attended to school together. He was a Muggle."

"You went to a Muggle school?"

"I lived in a Muggle town. How else was I meant to find friends?"

Remus was silent for a moment. When he spoke again, he seemed to be choosing his words with the utmost care.

“That must have been awful, coming back only to find …” He shook his head, grimacing. “Sorry, I mean, of course it was … I wish I could say something that would make you feel better, but I don’t suppose I can, can I? They’re just words, aren’t they? They can’t bring them back.”

“No, they can’t,” said Hermione softly. “But I appreciate the thought all the same. Thank you, Remus.”

He shrugged, giving her a weak smile, then nodded to her Potions essay, inquiring as to what it was on. She was grateful for the change of subject.

“Polyjuice Potion.”

“You seem to know an awful lot about it,” said Remus, appearing amused. “I haven’t seen you reference your notes once.”

Hermione winced; she should have at least pretended to look up the answers, but she had gotten distracted toying with her ring.

“Do you have much experience with brewing illegal potions?”

“I’ll admit to being rather interested in this particular potion …” she said slowly, flushing slightly. “I brewed it when I was thirteen to … you know … see how it worked, I suppose.”

Remus’ mouth fell open.

“*Thirteen*? You’re joking.”

“I was an exceedingly curious child.”

“And a brilliant one, at that. I don’t believe I could manage to brew Polyjuice even now. Potions has never been a particularly strong subject of mine.”

A sudden *thud* made them both glance round, startled. Regulus Black hastily replaced a fallen book on its shelf before striding away, his hands in his pockets.

“They’re watching me,” Hermione said uneasily, her voice barely above a whisper. “All of them.”

“I suppose they see you as competition,” said Remus. “They wouldn’t want you to replace them as Slughorn’s favourite, now, would they?”

“I suppose not,” she replied, but something told her this was much more than that.

*

“It’s just going to keep getting worse, isn’t it?”

Lily set the evening edition of *The Daily Prophet* down on her lap. She, Mary, Alice, and Hermione were sitting on their respective four-posters in their shared dormitory, meanwhile

Marlene had disappeared with Sirius almost immediately after classes had finished for the day.

Hermione looked down at her own copy of the *Prophet,* which she had taken from Remus. That evening's headline filled her with a familiar feeling of dread: *MUGGLE FAMILY MURDERED IN SURREY.* She remembered when this had begun happening in her fifth year; everyone had said it was the same as it had been the last time around. Now, she was seeing it for herself.

And there was nothing she could do about it.

"Is there any reason this family, specifically, was targeted?" Alice asked, looking worried. "Do they have any magical relatives, you think?"

Hermione scanned the article again, purposely ignoring the unmoving photograph of a family of four on a trip to the beach.

"The mother was the daughter of a Squib," she said after a moment. "Perhaps Voldemort thought —" She stopped herself when Lily and Alice flinched and Mary shrieked, nearly toppling off her bed. "Pardon me, sorry. Perhaps You-Know-Who thought one of the children would end up being magical and he's trying to keep them all from re-entering the wizarding world. That's the only reason I can come up with, anyway."

"How come you say his name?" asked Lily, looking paler than normal. "I've only ever heard Professor Dumbledore say it."

"Fear of a name only increases fear of the thing itself," said Hermione automatically. "I will stop saying his name only if he puts a taboo on it."

"A taboo?" said Mary, bemused.

"It would alert him and his followers to anyone that speaks his name. They would be able to Apparate to the speaker's location in a heartbeat."

Mary, Lily, and Alice all gaped at her in horror.

"Do you really think he might do that?" asked Alice.

"It's certainly a possibility," said Hermione hesitantly, although she did not know if he would. No one had ever mentioned to her whether he had used the taboo in this war.

"You should stop saying his name, then, Mione," said Lily seriously. "Just to be safe."

Hermione sighed but conceded; Lily was right. Until Hermione knew for certain that there was no taboo, she should avoid saying Voldemort's name. Perhaps she could call him Tom instead, she thought, but then again, very few people were aware of his true name, and it would not do to allow her own knowledge of it to come to light. What she knew must remain concealed at all costs.

During her free period the following day, she visited the library, and there, she checked out two books: *Protection Charm Your Mind: A Guide to Counter Legilimency* by Franciscus Fieldwake and *Guide to Advanced Occlumency* by Maxwell Barnett. If she proved somehow unlucky enough to encounter Voldemort in this time, she could not afford to have him find out not only that she was from the future, but that she knew about his Horcruxes, too, even the ones he had not yet created.

There were several methods one could use to protect their mind from invasion, Hermione soon learned. The method which Professor Snape had tried to teach Harry was the simplest form of Occlumency: clearing one's mind of all thoughts and emotions. It made sense that this had been his preferred method; the Snape of her youth had always appeared so cold and blank, almost emotionless. She did not want to be like that. Another method involved creating a false image to make the invader believe whatever you wished when, in reality, your true thoughts were hidden behind it. She doubted she would be able to keep that up for very long, but even so, it was worth it to try.

She sat on her bed, alone in her dormitory, and closed her eyes, attempting to clear her mind; it was important to practise discipline before testing out any methods. The problem was that — whilst discipline was something she had always excelled at — she had an exceptionally active mind. Every night for the rest of the week, she would draw the curtains shut around her bed and practice, just as she had once urged Harry to do, and the only good thing to come out of it was that she fell asleep the second her head hit her pillow.

By the second week of December, however, Hermione was able to empty her head of any thoughts or emotions. It left her feeling much like a feather, drifting in the wind, anchored to nothing. She did not much like it, but this was hardly important.

Upon returning from the first Hogsmeade trip of December (which she had spent with Lily and Mary), Hermione decided it was time to test one of the methods she had learned. Once again, she climbed onto her bed and drew the curtains shut. She sat cross-legged, her hands resting on her knees, and tried to imagine a false reality. Gone were the thoughts of bloody battles, rotten-smelling trolls, three-headed dogs, chained-up dragons, and red-headed children.

She replaced the Battle of Hogwarts with coming home to find her house had been set aflame. She pictured herself standing on the sidewalk of a typical suburban street, going as far as to assign the image the sensations of having a flaming heat on her face and thick smoke in her lungs, both of which were drawn from the very real memory of the Fiendfyre that had destroyed the Room of Hidden Things. The mountain troll, meanwhile, became a rather large and unattractive boy accosting her in the lavatory at a primary school, and the three-headed dog turned into accidentally entering the boys' changing-rooms and being confronted with three angry rugby players. She turned the dragon into an irritatingly long plane ride, the view of the water beneath her now seen through a small window on her left.

Rose and Hugo became the younger siblings of her boyfriend, whose name was Bilius Williamson. Summers at the Burrow were now trips to the Williamsons' family cottage. It shortened in height and lost most of its unstable appearance. The gnomes in the garden

became stationary. Pick-up Quidditch turned into football and Mrs Williamson cleaned and cooked without the aid of magic. Jumpers no longer knitted themselves.

Her parents' names went from Helen and William Granger to Monica and Wendell Greenwood. Their home was unexceptional but carried with it the same familiarity of her real childhood home; it held the lavender scent of her mother's preferred laundry detergent and the lingering lemon of the cleaning spray she used on the kitchen countertops. The Grangers went from dentists to private researchers for a nondescript potions company. She pretended not to know the name. The French they had occasionally used on their holidays in France was regularly spoken at the dinner table.

Hermione continued building up her false reality until she found herself dreaming about it, frequently waking up feeling befuddled and disconnected from the truth. When Remus asked about her parents during one of their study sessions in mid-December, she answered without thought, the lies already on the tip of her tongue.

"And yours?" she asked him.

"Well, my father — Lyall — he works in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures," he told her. "He specialises in Non-Human Spiritous Apparitions, like Boggarts and poltergeists. My mother's name is Hope. She's a Muggle but she's very accepting of all things magical. She wanted me to go to a Muggle primary school, too, you know."

"Did you?"

"No — er — things changed," said Remus, wincing, "and it wasn't exactly an option anymore."

"I'm sorry."

"It's fine. She wound up teaching me herself. Trips to the museum, workbooks on science and maths … that sort of thing. She had me read a lot of books by Muggle authors."

"Really?" said Hermione, straightening up eagerly. "Do you have a favourite?"

"Currently? *Tender is the Night*, I think," said Remus thoughtfully. "It's by F. Scott Fitzgerald. *Catch Twenty-Two* by Joseph Teller is a close second, though. I appreciated the dark humour," he added, with a small grin.

Hermione regarded him quizzically. "You do seem rather the sort to have a morbid sense of humour."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Not necessarily. Although if I hear you making any self-deprecating jokes, I may be liable to hex you."

"In that case, I promise not to say anything self-deprecating in your presence."

“Good. I’m very glad we’ve covered this.”

Remus laughed softly, reclining in his seat; the shift caused him to wince, and he rubbed the side of his ribs.

“All right?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine,” he said dismissively. “Just fell out of bed this morning. James and Sirius were up to their usual antics and decided the alarm clock ought to have a violent streak. Peter got the worst of it.”

Hermione glanced out the window beside them and up at the starry night sky: the moon was waxing. She looked back at Remus to see that he had followed her gaze and was now very pale. Indeed, he must have been telling the truth, for the full moon was weeks away, but she had still checked, and evidently, without subtlety.

“Do you still have some of that chocolate bar left?” she asked quietly, and he nodded slowly, apprehensive. “You should eat some. I hear it does wonders at making one feel better.”

Remus stared at her for a minute, as though waiting for something, before finally inhaling a shaky breath and reaching into his bag. The gigantic chocolate bar was a quarter of the size it had been when she had taken it, and he broke off a piece for himself with trembling hands.

“Aren’t you going to offer me a piece?”

“You — you want some?”

Hermione nodded, holding out her hand expectantly. Remus’ nervous swallow was loud, but after a moment, he broke off another piece and placed it carefully in her palm. She popped it in her mouth and, savouring the sweetness as it melted on her tongue, returned to her Arithmancy homework. She could feel his eyes on her but ignored him for now; he knew now that she was aware of his lycanthropy, and if he did not wish to speak about it, she would not bring it up.

Eventually, Remus ate his piece of chocolate and picked up his quill, his hands much steadier than before.

About an hour later, Hermione looked up to find him yawning widely. She sighed and began packing up her things.

“Let’s head back,” she said, standing up. “I could use a good night’s sleep.”

Remus nodded, not meeting her gaze. As they made their way out of the library, she looped her arm through his, just to prove that she was not afraid. She heard him let out an almost inaudible sigh of relief and smiled to herself, holding onto him just a little bit tighter.

*

The snow had progressed past mere flurries by the end of the week, now laying heavy and thick across the frigid grounds. Hermione, Remus, Lily, Peter, and Frank had to draw the

hoods of their cloaks over their heads as they left Greenhouse Three at the end of Herbology, shivering from head to toe as they hurried back inside the castle.

Herbology with the four of them that day had been a blessing to Hermione; Gryffindor had recently won its match against Slytherin, and James was nearly insufferable in his glee. Both he and Sirius had taken to swaggering about the corridors and shooting haughty looks at the members of the Slytherin Quidditch team, Regulus included. In fact, Sirius had nearly gotten into a public brawl with his brother when they had been leaving Transfiguration the previous day, just as the Slytherin fifth-years had been arriving for their next lesson. Hermione had shoved her way between the two brothers before either of them had a chance to draw their wand. "It's not worth it," she had said, and had then dragged Sirius away by his collar, giving Regulus an apologetic look over her shoulder.

Upon entering the Entrance Hall, the five of them brushed flakes of snow off their shoulders, then Hermione, Lily, and Frank set off for Potions. Professor Slughorn was in an awfully merry mood when they reached the dungeon classroom and took their places at the table they shared with Alice and Amelia Bones. He bustled about the room while they brewed the Antidote for Veritaserum, handing out invitations to his annual Christmas party.

"Do pass this on to the Head Boy for me, my dear," he told Lily, giving her a second invitation with James' name printed on the front.

"Of course, Professor," she said, and was instantly rewarded with an overly exaggerated wink that left her blushing furiously.

Hermione looked over her own invitation, raising an eyebrow at the garish holly pattern that ran along the border.

"He usually invites all sorts of people to these things," Amelia told her, sounding amused. "Witches and wizards from the Ministry, professional Quidditch players, published authors … all ex-students of his, of course."

"It'll be helpful in terms of finding a job for next year," said Frank, stirring counter-clockwise three times and following it up by stirring clockwise twice.

Alice nodded in agreement. "Slughorn's motto might as well be, 'You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.' He's Head of Slytherin House for a reason, you know. He'll set us all up for success so long as we remember we have him to thank for it."

"Not to mention that he expects to be paid back — in favours, that is," said Amelia, and she shrugged. "A fair trade, in my honest opinion."

Hermione finished off her antidote. It was a useful potion to know how to brew, especially if she should find herself being questioned under Veritaserum. But then again, she was studying Occlumency for a reason; those who were well-trained in the art were able to fight off the effects of truth serum. Nevertheless, she hoped it would not come to that.

With five minutes left before the end of class, Hermione, along with everyone else, carefully poured out a small portion of her potion to place on Professor Slughorn's desk.

“Oh, Mione, dear, before I forget,” he said. “You’ve never been to one of my — ah — soirées, if you will. There shall be a few highly influential people there that I am certain would be very eager to make your acquaintance. And you are more than welcome to bring a date, of course. I’m sure whomever you choose to accompany you will be a most brilliant gentleman,” he added, with a smile.

Beside Hermione, Snape gave a snort of amused scepticism as he handed in his antidote. She shot him a reproachful look before returning Professor Slughorn’s smile.

“I’m looking forward to it, sir.”

In truth, she was positively dreading the event, fearing it would turn out anything like the last one. Perhaps it would be a wise idea to bring a date, if only to ensure none of the future Death Eaters tried anything again; she resolved to ask Remus the next time she saw him.

“How long do you reckon it’s going to take James to ask you to the Christmas party?” Frank asked Lily as he led her and Hermione from the Potions’ classroom. Alice had disappeared with Amelia the second the bell had rung.

Lily rolled her eyes. “The moment I hand him his invitation, I expect.”

“Then don’t give him the chance,” said Hermione simply.

“And how do you suppose I do that?”

“Ask him first, of course.”

Lily stared at her, seeming baffled by the idea. As they continued down the dim dungeon corridor, she nearly collided with a third-year Hufflepuff. On the trek upstairs to the Entrance Hall, however, she turned her gaze forward, appearing mildly contemplative. By the time they reached the Great Hall, she looked downright determined.

Speeding up, she strode purposefully towards the Gryffindor table and slammed James’ invitation down in front of him, causing him to jump in alarm.

“You and I are going to Slughorn’s Christmas party together, all right?” Lily said, and she glared at Sirius, practically daring him to say anything. Everyone within earshot held their breath, watching in anticipation.

James opened and closed his mouth several times before nodding dumbly. She gave him a sharp nod and swiftly left the Hall.

The second she was gone, Sirius stood up on the bench to make a toast, holding up his goblet of pumpkin juice and wiping away a few nonexistent tears.

“To James Potter!” he bellowed, and nearly two dozen other Gryffindors raised their goblets. “The luckiest sod to ever live!”

“Actually,” said James, still looking rather shell-shocked, as a chorus of, “To James Potter!”s filled their side of the Hall, “I think I’ve just died and gone to heaven.”

Hermione, who had just taken a sip of her pumpkin juice, promptly choked. Remus patted her on the back.

“You are an inspiration to us all, Prongs,” said Sirius reverently.

“I didn’t even do anything,” said James, dumbfounded. “She just … Wow.”

“Padfoot’s right, though. You’ve displayed some true perseverance these last six years, Prongs,” said Remus, grinning. “Congratulations.”

“I think he’s gonna cry,” said Peter.

James looked at him, and his eyes really were watering. “This is the greatest day of my life,” he said faintly. Suddenly, he stood from the bench. “I have to owl my mother.”

They all watched him go, and the moment he disappeared into the Entrance Hall, each of them burst out laughing.

“Euphemia will have their wedding planned by the end of the week,” said Sirius gleefully.

Peter snickered. “We’ll have to throw him a stag party,” he said, and Sirius and Remus roared with laughter once more.

Hermione herself struggled to suppress a smile. She waited until the boys had calmed down before turning to Remus.

“Speaking of parties,” she said, “would you like to come to Slughorn’s with me?”

A slow smile spread across his face.

“I’d like that very much.”

Peter groaned, dropping his head onto the table.

“I’m going to die alone.”

Sirius slapped him on the back and said, “Cheer up, Wormy, at least you’ll have your hand for company.”

Chapter End Notes

A little background on Remus' favourite books:

Tender is the Night by F. Scott Fitzgerald
"Set on the French Riviera in the late 1920s, Tender Is the Night is the tragic romance of the young actress Rosemary Hoyt and the stylish American couple Dick and Nicole Diver. A brilliant young psychiatrist at the time of his marriage, Dick is both husband

and doctor to Nicole, whose wealth goads him into a lifestyle not his own, and whose growing strength highlights Dick's harrowing demise." — Goodreads.

Catch-22 by Joseph Heller
"The work centres on Captain John Yossarian, an American bombardier stationed on a Mediterranean island during World War II, and chronicles his desperate attempts to stay alive." — Encyclopedia Britannica.

Fernando

Chapter Summary

> They were closer now, Fernando
> Every hour, every minute seemed to last eternally
> I was so afraid, Fernando
> We were young and full of life and none of us prepared to die
> — Fernando, ABBA

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Oh, thank goodness," Marlene said, watching from her four-poster in Gryffindor Tower as Hermione, Lily, and Alice prepared for Professor Slughorn's Christmas party, "you're all wearing jewel tones."

Alice shot her an exasperated look through the mirror as she adjusted the neckline of her low-cut violet dress. Next to her, Lily was fiddling with the gold pin in her hair, wearing a dress the same shade of green as her eyes. Hermione herself was in a shimmering blue dress that she was beginning to think was too short for the time period.

"All right," Alice said, nodding in approval at her reflection, "I've got to go make sure Frank's tied his tie properly." She slipped on her platform shoes and left the dormitory just as Lily huffed in frustration, accidentally stabbing herself with her pin.

"Relax," Hermione told her gently, taking the pin and stepping behind her to put it in place. "It's only James. I highly doubt he'd notice if your hair wasn't perfect."

"I don't care what James thinks," said Lily snappishly. "This is for me."

Hermione sighed, setting her hands on her shoulders and meeting her gaze in the mirror.

"You look beautiful, Lily. And you have nothing to be anxious about."

"You're right. I don't. It's only James." Lily's eyes widened in alarm, and Marlene suddenly howled with laughter. "I meant Potter. It's only Potter. He's … a toerag."

"Ah, but he's *your* toerag!" sang Marlene.

Lily glared at her.

"Are you two ready?" asked Mary, poking her head into the dormitory. "Remus and James are waiting in the common room."

“I was born ready,” said Lily boldly. She scrunched up her nose. “That’s not what — I mean, it’s not as though I planned this or —” She shut her eyes, taking a deep breath before opening them again. “Yes, I’m ready.”

“Mione?”

“Just about,” said Hermione, sitting down to put on her heels. She gave herself one final look in the mirror before following Mary down to the common room, Lily close behind.

Remus was sitting comfortably in one of the armchairs in front of the fireplace, wearing a sharp set of grey dress robes that she suspected belonged to Sirius, because the legs were slightly too short. James, on the other hand, was pacing back and forth and repeatedly running his hand through his hair, making it even messier than it already was. He had on black dress robes with an emerald bowtie.

“Evans!” he exclaimed when he saw Lily at the foot of the stairs. His mouth fell open. “*Oh, Evans*.”

Smiling, Hermione walked past him over to Remus.

“Come on,” she said, offering him a hand up, “we should let them have their moment.”

“It’s been a long time in the making,” he said as they climbed out the portrait hole, her arm looped through his. “He nearly tore apart our dormitory trying to find a suitable outfit.”

“I’m not surprised. You look sharp, by the way. Very handsome.”

“Stop it, Mione. You’re going to make me blush.”

Professor Slughorn’s office was at full capacity by the time they arrived with Lily, James, Alice and Frank, all of whom had caught up to them on the way down to the dungeons. There was a small band in the corner playing *My Baby Gave Me a Hippogriff for Christmas* by Celestina Warbeck, students who hadn’t made it into the Slug Club serving drinks and hor d'oeuvres, mistletoe hanging above one of the sofas and more near the back, and a large and generously decorated Christmas tree that was tall enough to brush against the ceiling.

Alice and Frank made a beeline for Amelia Bones and another Hufflepuff seventh-year whom Hermione did not know, although he looked vaguely familiar. Professor Slughorn soon spotted Lily and waved her over to meet a very short wizard with a goatee. James practically glided along behind her, dreamily dazed.

“Shall we get some drinks?” Hermione asked Remus. “It will make this whole thing much more bearable.”

“I thought you said you learned your lesson about drinking around Slytherins.”

“Oh, but I have you here this time, Remus.” *And now I know my tolerance.* “I can drink all I want and not worry because you’ll take care of me. Come on.” She led him in the direction of one of the student servers and they each took a glass of sherry.

“Mione!” said Professor Slughorn cheerfully, abandoning Lily and James to bustle over to them. “I’m so glad you came. And would this be your date?” It took him a second, but he eventually remembered Remus’ name. Looking faintly disappointed, he added, “Mr Lupin.”

Remus shifted awkwardly.

“How’s your father these days?”

“Fine, sir.”

“Hmph.” Professor Slughorn returned his attention to Hermione. “I have a few people who are very interested in meeting you, my dear. Come, come!”

One large hand on her shoulder, he ushered her towards a wizard standing on the other side of the room, while Remus trailed after them. The wizard bore an appearance somewhat familiar, with his pale, pointed face and his white-blond hair slicked back, but she did not place him until she spotted the silver snake head on the handle of his walking-stick. He was too old to be Lucius, which meant —

“Abraxas, m’boy, this is Mione Greenwood. Only joined us just this year — terrible circumstances, you understand — but she has been an enormous pleasure to teach. Top of the class already! Mione, Mr Malfoy, here, is a prominent member of the Wizengamot. He has many advantageous connections at the Ministry; if you’ve an interest in working there next year, he’s the wizard to speak to.”

Abraxas extended a hand to Hermione, a rather calculated smile on his face. She shook it, ignoring the shiver that ran down her spine.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr Malfoy,” she lied.

“I assure you, Miss Greenwood, the feeling is mutual,” he said smoothly. “My daughter-in-law’s cousin, Regulus, has told me all about you. From what I’ve heard, Horace was wise to take you under his wing.”

“You flatter me, sir.”

Professor Slughorn beamed with pride, puffing out his chest. “I think I’ll just leave you to it, then,” he said, and he hurried off to introduce Eldred Worple to a journalist from *The Daily Prophet*.

“Edmund!” Abraxas called, beckoning over an imposing man with dark hair and a heavy brow who had been speaking to Rabastan Lestrange and Regulus Black. “This is Mione Greenwood.”

Edmund raised an eyebrow, offering Hermione his hand.

“Edmund Lestrange, Miss Greenwood.”

Hermione immediately stiffened.

“And who might this fellow be?” he asked, nodding to Remus.

“Remus Lupin,” said Regulus, his upper lip curling with disdain. “He’s a friend of my brother’s.”

“How unfortunate.”

“Indeed, Father,” said Rabastan, smirking.

Remus smiled through gritted teeth.

“Is Horace correct in his assumption that you wish to find work at the Ministry, Miss Greenwood?” asked Abraxas, curious.

“I’ve yet to make up my mind,” said Hermione, fighting not to show her discomfort, “but I’ve certainly considered it.”

“Which department might you be interested in?”

“My first choice would be the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures,” she said, since that was where she had started out in her own time, before moving on to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, “though the Department for International Magical Cooperation is a close second.”

These were all lies; next year, she would be wherever Professor Dumbledore put her.

“What did your parents do for a living?” asked Edmund, very obviously removing his eyes from her chest.

“They were researchers for a private potions company, sir. As a result, they typically worked from home.”

“I see. You were homeschooled, then.”

Hermione nodded. “If you’ll excuse me,” she said in a rush, “the Head Boy is trying to get our attention. It was lovely to meet you.” She took Remus by the hand and walked away at a pace that she tried to make appear calm, downing the remainder of her drink as she went. She quickly stole another from a passing server.

“Mr and Mrs Potter are fairly certain those two are Death Eaters,” Remus whispered to her. “Members of the Inner Circle.”

Hermione grimaced, taking a sip of sherry.

There was a miserable groan somewhere on their right; together, she and Remus glanced over to find Lily and James standing under a piece of mistletoe. Lily had turned bright red and was giving James an accusing look. He held up his hands, silently communicating that he was not to blame for this. For a moment, Lily seemed to struggle with herself, then, with a huff of annoyance, she rose onto the tips of her toes and kissed him.

Someone shoved past Hermione, nearly causing her to spill her drink, and she spun round to see the retreating back of Severus Snape.

“Stop it!” she heard Lily say, and she looked back over. “Stop grinning like that!”

James attempted to rearrange his face into something serious with no success.

Beside Hermione, Remus snickered into his drink.

“Mione! Mione, over here, my dear!”

Professor Slughorn stood about two metres away with Damocles Belby and another seventh-year Ravenclaw. Sighing in resignation, Hermione moved to join them, taking Remus with her. Professor Slughorn gestured for Remus to stand behind him and pulled her to his side, forcing her to face forward.

“Tarrin, m’boy! Take a picture!”

Hermione’s eyes widened in alarm, but it was too late; there was a blinding flash of light, and then the other seventh-year was giving them a thumbs-up.

“To add to my collection,” explained Professor Slughorn. He gestured proudly to a large mahogany shelf just to their left, where there were a series of framed photographs, beginning in black and white and slowly gaining colour. “You see?”

“A little warning would have been nice,” said Hermione tightly, “but I am honoured, nonetheless.”

“More alcohol?” murmured Remus, and she gave him a grateful look.

A short while later, the two of them were sitting on a cushioned bench by the door, happily buzzed. It was nice, she concluded, to have the freedom to act a little immature. She could hardly do that as a political leader.

“Do you understand now why mild intoxication is necessary for these things?”

“Definitely,” Remus said grimly. “For the first time ever, I am thankful to not be a member of the Slug Club.”

“He doesn’t know what he’s missing,” Hermione told him kindly. “I, for one, happen to think you’re brilliant.”

Remus smiled brightly — so brightly that it filled her with a pleasant warmth — but then he glanced down at the ring hanging from her neck and winced, looking away.

Hermione was not clueless. She knew what he must be thinking. But out of everyone in this time, he was the one whom she knew best from her own. She felt comfortable with him; it was as though he carried a small piece of home inside of him and she could not help but cling to it.

Ron would understand.

“You two enjoying yourselves?”

Tearing her eyes away from Remus, Hermione looked up at a still grinning James, Lily at his side.

“I am. Immensely. Have you met my girlfriend?”

Lily narrowed her eyes at him.

“I did not agree to that.”

“Yes, but it’s only a matter of time now.”

“Slughorn had us stand for a picture,” said Remus distastefully.

“Yes, he tends to do that,” said Lily. “I’m already on the shelf myself.”

Hermione nodded absently, her gaze now on Regulus and Rabastan, who were whispering rather excitedly with their heads bent together. It was strange to see Regulus so closely associated with those she knew to be future Death Eaters, assuming they were not already, when she also knew he would eventually turn against them all. The same could be said for Snape, she supposed; his friendship with Mulciber and Avery was nothing short of unsettling.

She shook herself from her thoughts, returning her attention to Remus, Lily, and James. Lily had seized the latter by his lapels and was dragging him away.

“Come, James,” she said, in a business-like tone. “We’re dancing now.”

James nodded happily.

“He’s such a sap,” muttered Remus, watching them move onto the dance floor. “After all the time he spent chasing her, talking about all the ways he would change her life for the better, the lengths to which he would go to show her how much he cared about her, and the second she gives him a chance, his brain has all but turned to mush.”

Hermione smiled, twisting in her seat to face him. “What would you say is the most extravagant thing he’s ever done to get her attention?”

Remus exhaled slowly, gazing up at the ceiling.

“I don’t even know at this point,” he said. “Maybe fourth year when he climbed up on the table during breakfast and *attempted* to serenade her. Please note the emphasis on ‘attempted.’”

“What did she do in response to that?”

“Encouraged everyone to throw food at him.”

“That’ll be a great story to tell their kid one day,” said Hermione, already imagining Harry’s reaction.

Remus clicked his tongue. “Kids — plural. James wants to create his very own Quidditch team.”

Hermione was thankful he was not looking at her, and therefore did not see the smile fall from her face. It took her a minute to find her voice again.

“When did it start for him?”

“First year. Granted, their initial encounter was less than pleasant. He thought she was rather stuck-up, actually. He took to calling her, ‘that ginger priss.’”

She could almost hear Ron’s voice saying, “She’s a nightmare, honestly,” in her head, and laughed, taking a sip of her drink.

“But then, during our first Flying Lesson,” Remus said, beginning to smile, “he — well, he’s Captain of the Gryffindor team, I’m sure you can imagine how well he did — but he kept looking around to make sure everyone was watching him, and the only two people not doing so were Lily and Sniv— er —” he cleared his throat, “— Snape. Anyway, James was outraged. Soon after that, he started doing everything he could to get her attention.

“By the time Christmas rolled around, he was convinced that he would one day make her his. He thought — because she had managed to ignore him for so long — she was the greatest thing since Chocolate Frogs. Said she had an iron will, and only a witch like that could make him happy.”

“He makes a good point.”

“Indeed, he does. I don’t think he could’ve picked a better witch to obsess over.”

Together, Hermione and Remus looked out onto the dance floor. They could not see Lily’s expression, for she was resting her head on James’ shoulder, facing away from them, but James appeared to be in a state of complete and utter bliss. Hermione suspected that someone could have told him that he was off the Quidditch team, and he would remain unbothered.

She knew that she would be forever grateful that she had gotten to see Lily’s dislike for him dwindle into nothingness. So many of the moments she had witnessed between the two of them would make for great stories to tell Harry one day. It reminded her, quite a bit, of Scorpius Malfoy’s unwavering awe of Rose, who — last Hermione had heard — was too busy ogling a boy named Yann Fredericks to give him the time of day.

At that thought, Hermione felt herself grow cold and heavy. A terrible weight pressed against her chest, and she sank back in her seat, holding her drink in both hands and resting it on her lap to keep from dropping it.

Professor Slughorn’s Christmas tree was much bigger than the one Ron brought home each December, and there were no homemade ornaments on it; no macaroni art with messily

scrawled names on the backs and no red and gold stringing lights. The large fireplace on the other end of the room had no hand-knitted stockings hanging from its mantle. There was no Molly Weasley cheerfully singing along as the band played *A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love*. Hermione would not be spending Christmas morning in a pair of flannel pyjamas, sitting on the sofa of her London townhouse with a warm cup of tea and watching Rose and Hugo tear open their gifts. She would not be visiting the Burrow and witnessing Molly fail to notice the Petrified garden gnome atop her tree. There would be no new jumpers with the letter "*H*" stitched onto the front, nor any other letter for that matter.

Instead, Hermione would remain here, alone in the castle, for two entire weeks. She would attend a small Christmas dinner in the Great Hall with the professors and the half-dozen students left behind before returning to an empty dormitory.

An empty bed.

"Mione, what's wrong?" Remus asked her, and she turned her head to find him eyeing her in concern. "You're crying."

"Oh — erm —" Hermione hastily removed one hand from her drink to wipe at her face, sniffling, "— sorry, I didn't realise. Can we — can we leave, please?"

"Yeah. Yeah, of course."

He took both of their drinks, set them down on the floor by their feet, took her hand, and led her swiftly from the room. She didn't pay much attention to where they were going; as soon as she had noticed she was crying, she found that she could not stop; the dungeon corridor before them was a blur of grey stones and flickering greenish lights.

Hermione did not know how much time had passed before they stepped out into the snow-covered courtyard. Remus used a Vanishing Spell to clear off one of the stone benches and pulled her down to sit beside him before then casting a Hot Air Charm over them both.

"I miss them, Remus," Hermione said in a cracked voice, propping her elbows up on her knees and hiding her face in her hands. "I miss them so much."

"I know," he said quietly, rubbing her back comfortingly. "I'm sorry. I wish there was something I could do to make it hurt less."

She didn't say anything in response, certain that if she were to open her mouth, the only words that would come out would be, "Fuck you, Theodore Nott." She settled for repeating them in her head instead, the sound growing louder and louder until she was screaming it, and yet, nothing came out.

After a while, Remus dug into his pocket and, a second later, she smelt the sickening smoke of a cigarette. She raised her head to gape at him in disbelief as he exhaled slowly, letting out a puff of white smoke no different from the sight of their breath in the frosty air.

"Pardon my language," she said weakly, "but are you fucking serious?"

He drew the cigarette from between his lips and shook his head.

“No, I’m afraid he’s not really my type. I imagine he’d be quite loud in bed, though, don’t you think?”

Hermione huffed a near laugh and straightened up, wiping her eyes once more.

“Those are terrible for you,” she said, sniffling still. “You do know that, don’t you?”

Remus shrugged, taking another long drag.

“A lot of things are terrible for me,” he said, blowing the smoke out. “At least I chose this.”

“That’s an awfully depressing perspective.”

“Would it make you feel better if I told you I only smoke when I drink?”

“Only if it’s the truth.”

He held his cigarette away from them both and leaned towards her, dropping his voice to a whisper. “I only smoke when I drink.”

Hermione smiled, amused and exasperated in equal measure. She shoved him away gently.

“You reek something dreadful now.”

“Perhaps,” said Remus, finally putting out his cigarette and disposing of it with another Vanishing Spell, “but at least I made you smile.”

*

The following morning, Professor McGonagall visited Gryffindor Tower to take down the names of everyone who would be staying at Hogwarts for the holidays. Her list had only two other names by the time it reached Hermione, who was sitting at a table with Mary, Marlene, and Lily, but when Hermione made to add her own, the latter stopped her.

“You’re welcome to spend the holidays with me, Mione,” she said with a small smile. “You don’t have to, of course, but nobody should be alone on Christmas.”

And that was how Hermione found herself in the backseat of Vernon Dursley’s light gold Ford Cortina, listening to Petunia Evans explain the seven different flower arrangements she was considering for their July wedding.

Although still quite large, Vernon was not as whale-like as Hermione remembered, but rather burly; Dudley Dursley had told her at one of Harry and Ginny’s annual New Year’s Eve parties that he had been on the wrestling team when he was in school, so she supposed that she should not have been surprised. Petunia, on the other hand, looked like the sort of woman whom Hermione would find sitting in a salon chair and flipping through a magazine on interior design. She had blonde hair and a rather long neck that was adorned with small, beaded pearls.

Lily turned to her with a long-suffering look, and Hermione stifled a snicker. As soon as Petunia stopped for breath, Hermione cleared her throat, and asked, "So, how did you two meet?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose Lily hasn't told you, has she?" said Petunia, with a delicate sniff. She tossed her hair over her shoulder. "*Well*, after my first year of uni, I spent the summer working at this sweet little flower shop on Bank Street. One day, Vernon came in — he had been on his way to his grandmother's house, you see, and he had *forgotten* to get her flowers! He only stopped there because it was on his way! Pure chance, really —"

"Could you turn on the radio, Tuney?" asked Lily.

"Hush, Lily, I'm speaking. *Anyway*, Vernon came into the shop, and the manager had just stepped out for her lunch break, so I was the only one there to help him — and he did need the help, frankly, because he was absolutely —"

"*Hopeless*," Lily mouthed to Hermione, just as Petunia exclaimed, "hopeless!"

"That I was, dear," said Vernon, with a small chuckle.

"He nearly got his grandmother *potted* flowers, but, luckily, I stopped him. I asked him a few questions about his grandmother, you know, just to see what sort of lady she was, and I sent him off with a bouquet of white roses and baby's breath, but not before he gave me his telephone number!"

"That's ever so romantic, Petunia!" said Hermione, in a voice reminiscent of Dolores Umbridge. "Goodness, aren't you lucky to have a story like that?"

Petunia nodded impressively.

"And, to think, Lily met her future husband on a train ride when he insulted her closest friend!"

Lily elbowed her in the ribs, and now Hermione did snicker. At the mention of a train ride, Petunia turned on the radio and raised the volume loud enough that none of them would be able to hear each other anymore. This did not prevent Lily from belting out the lyrics to every ABBA song that happened to come on, much to her sister's annoyance.

Vernon parked on the street out front of the Evans' home in Cokeworth roughly half an hour later. It was a two-story brown-brick house with a rusting metal fence and front steps that had a loose brick which Lily warned Hermione not to step on and which Vernon immediately declared he would repair the following morning. Hermione wondered if Lily was having one of those Muggle-born moments in which one forgot they could simply use magic.

The front door opened into a cramped hallway, which had a steep, narrow staircase on one side, and on the other, an entrance to a neat sitting room with striped wallpaper, a ghastly pea-coloured shag rug, and an even worse mustard sofa; not for the first time, Hermione had to remind herself that these were, after all, the seventies. Sitting on the opposite and much less offensive beige sofa and sharing a pot of tea were Mr and Mrs Evans.

Mr Evans was a very tall man, and it was clear that Petunia had him to thank for her neck. He had greying brown hair and wore a burgundy collared jumper that was tucked into his trousers. Mrs Evans was rather petite with blonde hair tied back in a small knot. She wore a floral dress with a cardigan that was buttoned all the way up to her neck. Both rose to greet Lily while Vernon dragged in their luggage from the boot of his car.

Petunia disappeared into the next room.

"We want to hear everything — absolutely everything — my dear," Mrs Evans told Lily excitedly, releasing her from a tight embrace. "You've got to wait a few days, mind, just until Vernon leaves —"

"But I'm sure there is plenty you can tell us in his presence," Mr Evans said, wrapping one arm around Lily and pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "You'll just have to censor yourself a bit. Shouldn't be a problem, cheeky witch that you are."

Lily giggled, nodding her head, and went onto the tips of her toes to peck him on the cheek. Then she stepped back slightly and gestured to Hermione.

"Mum, Dad, this is my friend, Mione."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr and Mrs Evans," said Hermione sincerely, offering her hand to each of them in turn. "Thank you for your hospitality."

"Oh, pish, posh!" said Mrs Evans, waving her hand as though to bat away a fly. She beamed. "Any friend of Lily's is welcome in our home. Of course, she hasn't brought a friend home in quite some time, not since — oh, well, best not to talk about that. Lily says you're from France, is that right?"

And this is where Petunia got her penchant for gossip, Hermione thought, amused.

"Her *parents* were, Mum," said Lily. "Mione was born here in England."

"Oh, yes, now I remember. So sorry, dear, about what happened to them. Just horrid … you poor thing …" Mrs Evans clicked her tongue in what appeared to be disapproval over the fact that Hermione was supposedly an orphan. After a split-second's debate, she spread her arms wide and waved her closer. "Come here, then, let me give you a hug."

As they sat down for dinner in a small, teal-tiled kitchen with banana-coloured appliances fifteen minutes later, Hermione realised that she had not stopped smiling since she had stepped in the front door. She wished that Harry had gotten the chance to meet Mr and Mrs Evans, but at least she would be able to tell him all about them when she saw him again. Perhaps she should consider finding a way to get herself invited to the Potters' so that she might meet his other set of grandparents as well.

"Now, Lily, how are you handling your newfound responsibilities as Head Girl?" Mr Evans asked after they said grace. He served himself some roast beef, glancing up at his youngest daughter with a sly smile. "The Head Boy's not giving you too much trouble, I hope."

“Surprisingly, no,” said Lily, without meeting his gaze. She took a sip of her water, then set it down with extreme care. “James has been rather helpful as of late, actually. He’s better with the younger students than I’d thought he’d be.”

“James? Who is James? I thought that Potter boy was given the position.”

She turned faintly pink.

“They’re the same person,” said Hermione. “James Potter. I’ve only met him this year, of course, but he seems like a good person to me.”

Lily nodded, agreeing, but took a massive bite of mashed potatoes to avoid speaking.

“Isn’t he the one who’s always pestering you?” asked Petunia, raising a sceptical eyebrow. “I’ve only ever heard you refer to him as, ‘Potter,’ or, ‘that toerag.’”

“Our Chemistry professor held a small Christmas party for the members of his club,” Hermione told her smoothly. Lily inhaled sharply beside her. “I’m sure Lily’s told you about the club — he only ever invites those he deems to have great potential to join it. Anyway, Lily and James attended the party together.”

“My goodness!” exclaimed Mrs Evans. “You didn’t include *that* in your letter, Lily!”

“He’s really …” Lily winced, her face going from pink to red, “not so bad …” She straightened up suddenly, apparently having gathered her courage, and lifted her gaze from her plate. “He’s grown up quite a bit in the last few years. There was a — er — situation following the end of exams in fifth year in which he proved to be a much better person than I’d thought he was. Don’t misunderstand me, he’s still quite the joker, but now … well, it’s like I said. He’s grown up.”

“That’s good to hear,” said Mr Evans decidedly, nodding to himself. “If things carry on this way, my dear, you’ll have to bring this fellow home so we can meet him.”

Lily pressed her lips together in what appeared to be an attempt to supress a smile.

“Maybe one day, Dad.”

Petunia dabbed the corners of her mouth with her napkin, her shoulders tense, and Vernon placed a hand on her forearm in sympathy; her parents had not asked her a single question since they had arrived.

After dinner, Mr Evans and Vernon went out to buy them a tree, and Hermione spent the evening decorating it with the Evans’ women whilst listening to holiday music. It was not quite the Burrow, but she was endlessly grateful to Lily for having invited her, nonetheless, even if she became dreadfully bored during Midnight Mass at the Evans’ church two nights later.

Christmas morning turned out to be a bit of a surprise. Several owls had arrived in the night to deliver gifts, and Hermione was faintly stunned that some of them were for her. On top of the white frock dress Lily had given her, Mary had sent her a copy of *New Theory of*

Numerology by Lukas Karuzos that had come out earlier that month (Hermione did not have the heart to tell her that she had already read it) and Remus had sent an assortment of Muggle chocolates, along with a small note.

Mione,

These may or may not be poisoned. You have been forewarned.

Happy Christmas.

Remus

Hermione had not thought to purchase gifts for any of them. After all, it had not been until her second year at Hogwarts that anyone besides her parents had given her a Christmas present; she had not realised that it would be different this time around.

She decided to rectify the situation immediately.

After Petunia and Vernon left for Christmas dinner with Vernon's family ("Marge has gotten a new dog, he's just the dearest little thing!"), Hermione and Lily set out for what was the most shamefully late Christmas shopping Hermione had ever done. She still had a decent amount of Muggle money left over from her trade with Sirius, so she was able to get a fifty-percent-off advent calendar for Remus, a yellow knitted jumper that was meant for a dog for Mary to put on her teddy bear, and she had Lily pick out an ABBA band t-shirt for herself. They sent off Remus' and Mary's gifts with Lily's owl, Peppermint, and Hermione attached a five-inch-long apology to every one of them.

With Vernon gone, Lily was now able to tell her parents much more about the goings-on at Hogwarts. She and Hermione were also able to use magic freely within the house, which Hermione thoroughly appreciated, for she had not had to restrict her magic usage in a very long time.

Over the next few days, she played more chess matches with Mr Evans than she could count (and won every time, thanks to Ron's influence and much to Mr Evans' frustration), explored the neighbourhood with Lily (although they were mindful to steer clear of Spinner's End, where Snape lived), listened to Mrs Evans fill Lily in on the nasty divorce Mr and Mrs Nextdoor were going through, and watched several films that she had not seen in years, including *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, the perpetually tear-inducing *It's a Wonderful Life*, and *The Great Escape*, the latter of which, as soon as she picked up on Mr Evan's rough sniffles, led her to noticing, for the first time, a small framed collection of medals that sat on the bookcase beside the television.

She had not realised, before then; she had not done the maths. But Mr Evans was the right age, and next to the medals rested a photograph of young man in uniform, smiling, because it had been taken when that young man had still had something to smile about.

Hermione gave her own smile when Mr Evans caught her looking at him, but said nothing, even if she wanted to say plenty.

On New Year's Eve, she and Lily waited until Mr and Mrs Evans had driven off to a party one of their friends was hosting before hastily getting ready to go to a pub three streets over. It turned out that Harry's mother was a very talkative drunk, which really should not have come as a surprise. She also became rather hyperactive. Several times, Hermione found herself reminded of James.

"What d'you think would happen if I used a Banishing Spell to make that man's watch disappear and reappear in his mate's pint? Shall we find out? No, that's a bad idea. It's illegal, isn't it? Should I do it, anyway? No. No, I shouldn't. Oh, my goodness, they're playing *Dancing Queen*!"

Lily leapt out of their booth, drink in hand, and raced off to join the two-dozen others already dancing. She bumped into another girl about two minutes later, accidentally spilt her drink down the front of her dress, panicked and began throwing napkins at her, realised that this method was less than effective, and offered to buy her an apology drink before discovering that she had already spent nearly all her money. The girl ran to the lavatory in tears and Lily returned to the booth with a miserable expression.

"If only I could use magic …" she moaned, laying her head on the table. "I'm a dreadful Head Girl. Professor McGonagall would be so cross with me if she were here. Look at me, spilling drinks left and right!" she added, sitting up and sweeping her arms wide, as though to draw further attention to the situation at hand.

She wound up knocking Hermione's drink to the floor and started to cry.

Needless to say, Hermione was thoroughly entertained, even more so when she reached Lily's level of intoxication and the two of them attempted to waltz to *How Deep is Your Love* by the Bee Gees only to aggressively scream the lyrics to *Don't Go Breaking My Heart* by Elton John a minute later. An hour after the countdown — during which they were nearly kicked out due to Lily climbing onto a table — they stumbled back to the Evans' house, giggling and leaning heavily on each other while they sang *Fernando* by ABBA.

"*There was something in the air that night …*" Lily paused briefly to focus on unlocking her front door; "*The stars were bright, Fernando ... They were shining there for you and me ... For liberty, Fernando …*"

The hideous mustard sofa was promptly transformed into her own personal stage. Laughing, Hermione took off her boots and coat before climbing up onto the beige one.

"*Though we never thought that we could lose; There's no regret*! *If I had to do the same again; I would, my friend, Fernando*! *If I had to do the same again; I would, my friend, Fernando*!"

She removed her wand from her coat pocket to use as a makeshift microphone.

"*Now we're old and grey, Fernando … Since many years I haven't seen a rifle in your hand*!"

Still singing, Lily threw her coat across the room with a force that any Chaser would deem impressive.

"*Can you hear the drums, Fernando*? *Do you still recall the frightful night we crossed the Rio Grande*? *I can see it in your eyes, how proud you were to fight for freedom in this land*!"

There was a sudden pounding on the door, causing them both to jump up in alarm. Hermione spun round to look out the window behind her, her face falling at the sight of the blue lights flashing out front.

Chapter End Notes

In every Marauders' time-travel fic, Christmas is spent at Potter Manor. I decided to change things up, because let me tell you now, this is not going to be your average Marauders' time-travel fic. Also, the picture Slughorn has taken was inspired by one he had on his shelf in the movies. You can find it on the Slug Club page on Harry Potter Wiki.

Mourning

Chapter Summary

> I don't know what to do without you
> I don't know where to put my hands
> I've been trying to lay my head down
> But I'm writing this at 3 a.m.
> — Francis Forever, Mitski

Chapter Notes

> It's never stated how Lily's parents died — all that's known is that they died "normal Muggle deaths." This is my take on it. Also — new character in this chapter:)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione had lived her fair share of experiences with death. That was what happened when one lived to see the end of a war: being forced to come to terms with the fact that not everyone did.

But Lily was seventeen. She was still in school and had not yet joined the Order of the Phoenix. The only duelling she had done had been within the confines of a classroom. She did not know death the way Hermione did.

Not yet.

So, Hermione spoke to the officers at the door. She telephoned the Dursley residence. She sent a letter to Professor McGonagall. She helped Lily change into her pyjamas and tucked her into bed when she passed out, her face stained with tears. She put on a pot of tea and forced Petunia to drink it despite her trembling hands. She contacted the Evans' church with Vernon while Lily and Petunia slept. She spent an hour sitting by the telephone, calling every number in the address book. She said, "I'm sorry for your loss," so many times that the words did not even sound like words anymore.

And when Professor McGonagall gave her and Lily permission to extend their holiday, she accompanied Petunia to the funeral home to make arrangements. She picked out a casket because Petunia could not look at them. She tossed out the morning paper before anyone could see the headline, *DRUNK DRIVER KILLS TWO AFTER NYE CELEBRATION*. She accepted the meals the neighbours dropped off each day. She coaxed Lily to eat and poured

Vernon a brandy when no one was looking. She helped Lily wash her hair and zipped up the back of her black dress.

Finally, two weeks later, when they stepped off the Knight Bus in Hogsmeade, Hermione held Lily's hand and led the way, knowing that if she did not, Lily would turn back the way they had come.

"If you can't tell them," Hermione told her gently as they approached the wrought-iron front gates of the castle, "then I'll do it for you. But, Lily, they're your friends. Let them be there for you."

Lily only nodded. She glanced lifelessly around them at the darkened grounds and shuffled closer to Hermione, resting her head on her shoulder as they walked.

It was Sunday evening and dinner was already over; the corridors were empty. Professor McGonagall awaited them in the Entrance Hall, and she sent their belongings to their dormitory with a Banishing Spell before, hesitating for no more than a few seconds, she drew Lily into a warm embrace. When Lily eventually pulled away, Professor McGonagall took them up to Gryffindor Tower, a solemn expression on her face.

"If you ever wish to speak to someone, Lily," she said as they neared the portrait of the Fat Lady, "I would be more than happy to listen." Lily said nothing, so she turned to the Fat Lady, adding, "Gloria omnibus."

Once more, Hermione took Lily's hand and led the way. The second that they entered the common room, Mary, Alice, and Marlene were leaping up from their table and James and Remus were rising from the sofa by the fireplace. Lily turned to Hermione and shook her head almost frantically; Hermione nodded in understanding and went to intercept them before they could approach her.

"I'll tell you what happened, just sit down," she said, catching Marlene by the elbow when she attempted to follow Lily up the stairs to the girls' dormitories. "She doesn't wish to speak to anyone right now."

"But —"

"No," said Hermione, in a tone that brokered no argument. "Sit down."

Reluctantly, they all backed away to gather round the hearth, eyeing her with mounting apprehension. James opened his mouth to speak, but Hermione shook her head at him. Taking a seat on the coffee table before them all, she began to explain. Mary and Alice were in tears by the time she finished, James was slumped against the sofa, looking pale and horrified, and Marlene was on her feet again, heading straight for the stairs.

"Marlene, sit back down!" Hermione snapped, causing them all to stare at her, taken aback. She took a deep breath, reining in her temper. "I know you want to help her, but she wants to be alone right now. She's not ready to talk about it. When — and only when — she decides differently, you will let her come to you. Do you understand?"

“I’m her best friend!” said Marlene angrily. “Who are you to tell me what she wants or doesn’t want?”

“Have you ever had someone you love die on you, Marlene?” asked Hermione. It was harsh, she knew, but she was tired. “No? Then trust that I know what I’m talking about and sit the hell down.”

Marlene glared at her, fuming, but after a sharp look from Alice, she returned to her seat, leaning into Sirius when he put his arm around her.

Remus stood then, took Hermione’s hand, and wordlessly led her up to the seventh-year boys’ dormitory, her feet dragging with every step. The room was a mess that rivalled that of James Sirius Potter, which was really saying something, seeing as there were times at which his floor was no longer visible. Remus sat her down on what she assumed was his own bed since it was one of the only two that had been made, and she went about removing her coat, scarf and gloves.

“Lily’s lucky you were there to take care of her,” he said quietly, sitting down beside her. “I can’t imagine …” He shook his head, swallowing visibly. “Thank you, Mione.”

Hermione could only shrug. She was utterly drained, having hardly slept in over a week. Remus seemed to sense that because he encouraged her to take off her boots and crawl under the scarlet quilt.

“Just get some rest,” he told her, as she laid her head on his pillow and curled onto her side. “I’ll be here when you wake up.” And with that, he picked up a book from his bedside table and settled down on the four-poster next to read.

When Hermione woke, the curtains had been drawn shut around her. She pulled them back slightly to find sunlight streaming in through the window. All she wanted at that moment was to turn over and go back to sleep, but she forced herself to her feet and began gathering her things.

Remus was asleep in the same four-poster he had sat on the night before, now with a snoring Sirius lying half on top of him. The sight brought a small smile to her face.

With a flick of her wand, she remade Remus’ bed, and gathered her belongings before tiptoeing out of the silent dormitory.

The alarm clock in the girls’ dormitory told her that it was half-past six. All four of the other seventh-year girls were still asleep. At least, she assumed; the hangings on Lily’s four-poster were drawn shut. Hermione got herself ready for the day regardless, and she left Gryffindor Tower on her own.

Only a handful of people were at breakfast and the Gryffindor table was entirely empty. She sat down and fixed herself a bowl of porridge, even though she was not hungry. She wanted to go home so badly that it made her sick to her stomach. How she was meant to stay in this time for over three years was beyond her.

“I must say that I’m surprised to see you here so early, Miss Greenwood.”

Hermione looked up to find Professor Dumbledore standing before her, his hands clasped behind his back.

“It is lucky, however,” he said. “I had planned on sending you a message later today, and this is much more convenient. I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t mind stopping by my office this evening — say, seven o’clock — so that we might discuss your *immediate* future in further detail.”

“Of course, Headmaster,” Hermione said, forcing a smile.

“I am a great fan of Pepper Imps,” said Professor Dumbledore with a wink, and he strode away, leaving her to her breakfast.

She propped her head up on her hand, staring morosely at her porridge; she doubted she could stomach any more of it. It was as though watching Lily and Petunia mourn their parents had reminded her of just how alone she was, and she wondered if she had been selfish to have allowed herself to forget that for even a second.

Someone sat down beside her on the bench, and Hermione glanced sideways at them. Her eyes widened.

“What happened?” Snape asked in a low voice, without meeting her gaze.

He need not clarify.

“Mr and Mrs Evans were in an accident on New Year’s,” she murmured. “A drunk driver hit their car while they were on their way back from a party. By the time the ambulance arrived, it was too late.”

Snape closed his eyes briefly, then asked, so quietly that Hermione almost didn’t hear him, “How is she?”

“Not good, but she’ll be alright, in time.”

He nodded, not looking at her still. “I stayed here for the holiday,” he said, “so I didn’t know why …” He trailed off, drawing a rattling breath.

“Can I tell her,” asked Hermione, “or would you rather I keep this between us?”

“Between us.”

“Very well. Get back to your table before someone takes note of your presence here. I doubt that would do you much good.”

Snape grunted softly in agreement, then rose and crossed the Hall to the Slytherin table. He was homesick, too, in a way, Hermione thought, watching him fix himself a cup of tea only to not take a single sip.

She longed to hear Ron's voice again; she missed the sound of his laugh and the feeling that came with being held in his arms. She wished she could sit on the sitting-room sofa with Hugo, each of them reading their own book and pausing every few minutes to share something they had learned, and she wished that she could braid Rose's hair whilst listening to her rant about Scorpius Malfoy and Anna Adley — a girl whom Hermione and Ron had quickly deduced was the actual eleven-year-old Draco Malfoy reincarnated.

"He told me I smelt like bread, Mum. Bread. And then he asked me to Hogsmeade! As if!"

"Scorpius tried to hug me in Potions last month. I kicked him in the shin — but don't worry, Professor Winthrop's back was turned."

"She said that I think I'm better than everyone else, the bloody hypocrite. I've watched her take out a compact mirror in the middle of Charms!"

"Adley got me banned from the library for the rest of term, Mum! It's totally unfair! She's the one who threw the first punch!"

It took everything in Hermione not to walk out of the castle and Apparate to the Burrow. Just being there, she was sure, would make her feel a little more at home.

She distracted herself by taking detailed notes in each of her lessons that day, even though she knew nearly all the information by heart. It felt as though she were taking remedial classes; if those around her did not already believe her to be a student, she would have been incredibly embarrassed to so much as step foot in a single one of their classes.

When it came time to meet Professor Dumbledore, her fingers were covered in ink. She hastily removed it with a Wiping Spell before approaching the gargoyle that guarded the Headmaster's Office.

"Pepper Imps," she said tonelessly, and the gargoyle leapt aside, permitting her entrance. All energy seemed to have fled her, and she did not bother knocking on the door when she reached it; she pushed it open, walked in, dropped into the seat opposite Professor Dumbledore's desk, crossed her legs, and waited for him to speak.

Perhaps it was because of the tired look on Hermione's face or the way that she began twirling the ring round her neck, but Professor Dumbledore forewent any formalities, and said, "I have devised a plan concerning where you shall be placed following graduation."

"I presume I'll be staying at Hogwarts?" she said.

"Indeed," said Professor Dumbledore, inclining his head. He folded his hands atop his desk and peered at her over his half-moon spectacles, perched on the tip of his crooked nose. *Crooked,* she thought numbly, *because his brother punched him in the face at their sister's funeral*. When Rita Skeeter had finally decided to write the truth of her own free will, she had certainly selected quite the story; Hermione wondered how devastated he would be if he were to learn about the publication of *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore.*

“To start, this summer, you shall be assisting Madam Pince in the library,” he continued. “I have already discussed this with her, and she was, believe it or not, amenable. It isn’t often that she feels anything beyond either disdain or indifference towards a student. You have clearly made a good impression on her.

“Now, I believe this can be easily explained to the friends you’ve made since your arrival in this time. Might they be aware of your lack of funds?”

Hermione nodded even though she hadn’t a clue if that were true or not.

“Understanding shall come easily to them, then. You will inform them that you have been provided living arrangements here in the castle, and come September, you will be apprenticing under the supervision of our newest Defence Against the Dark Arts professor. You shall do another year of apprenticing before taking the position yourself, seeing as — as far as the eye can see — you are currently too young to teach.”

Professor Dumbledore smiled then, as though he had told a particularly witty joke. Hermione tried to smile back, but it felt more like a grimace.

“After that,” he said, “you must only wait a few short months before it is safe for you to return to your own time. You will, of course, spend that time in the castle.”

Hermione did not have a response to that; nothing she could say would make a difference, for this, apparently, was how it ought to be. Teaching DADA did sound somewhat exciting, though. She thought she would make for a decent teacher; already, she was formulating lesson plans in her head. Even if Barty Crouch Jr had been impersonating Alastor Moody at the time, his adamance over including the Unforgivable Curses in the curriculum was something she now agreed with, especially when considering the utter devastation these students would face upon graduating.

“I’m afraid I must ask whether or not you have managed to avoid revealing the truth concerning your sudden appearance here at Hogwarts,” Professor Dumbledore said regretfully, after a moment. “I have noticed that the friends you’ve made here were ones whom you seemed to know previously, and I wonder if that has caused any conflicting feelings.”

“It has been … unpleasant at times,” said Hermione carefully, “knowing their futures but being unable to warn them, and I’m sure that will only get worse the longer I’m around them, but the time I come from is a time of peace, Professor. I wouldn’t dare put that future at risk.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” said Professor Dumbledore, smiling again. “I suppose all there is left to say is good luck on your examinations. I have every faith that you will perform outstandingly.”

“Thank you, sir.” With a parting wave, Hermione rose and left the office. Only once she was safely out of sight did she allow her shoulders to sag; she leaned against the wall in the empty corridor, exhausted.

The next three years were going to be very lonely indeed. Most of the friends she had made would be leaving, eventually going on to join the Order of the Phoenix, and even if she were given leave to visit them occasionally, there would be too much that they would not be able to tell her. There would be silences that seemed never-ending, in which none of them knew what to say; she would ask what they had done that day, and they would have to make up an answer because they could not tell her that they had been doing work for the Order.

There was also the fact that Hermione was already lying to them herself, and would continue to do so for as long as she remained in this time. Everything would feel false, their friendship would be strained, and she would be left alone.

She wanted to go home. The ache in her stomach had only worsened at Professor Dumbledore's reminder that she would be stuck here without a single companion. What was she meant to do — befriend Madam Pince?

"I don't understand," Hermione heard a soft voice say nearby. She raised her head, listening closely. "How can you believe that they are any less human than you or I?"

"I never denied the fact that they're human," said another voice that she recognised at once as Barty Crouch Jr's. "Don't you understand? How could they possibly be as capable as those of us who have lived in this world all our lives? The very idea is inconceivable!"

"I will admit that they have much to learn when they enter our world, and it's true that there are times when they're ignorant of our culture, yes, but they deserve our acceptance, nonetheless. We should be guiding, not exiling them!"

Barty scoffed.

"You think thousand-year-old traditions can simply be taught?"

"They are taught to *us*!"

"From birth. Mudbloods haven't a chance of understanding the way our world functions. They'll twist our traditions until they suit their own beliefs — for Merlin's sake, it's already started! A century from now, our culture will be unrecognisable! *Unless we do something about it*."

"Regulus," the girl said imploringly, "please, say something."

"I agree …" said Regulus Black, "with Barty."

Hermione crept down the corridor, drawing closer to the voices so that she might hear them better. The girl now sounded as if she were crying.

"It is no matter," she said, sniffling. "Holding these beliefs does not mean you should join him. Do you truly think he has your best interest at heart?"

"Of course, he doesn't!" snapped Barty. "Neither of us are daft enough to fall for that. He does, however, have every intention of restoring our world to its former glory, and *that* is in *everyone's* best interest."

There was a beat of silence, and then the girl said, in a voice heavy with sadness, “I cannot be your friend if you decide to go through with this.”

“Then this is where we part,” said Regulus quietly.

“Please, Reggie. You’re smarter than this.”

“Don’t bother begging,” said Barty scathingly. “You could get down on your knees and it would still change nothing; we’ve made up our minds.”

“I’m sorry,” whispered Regulus, and then there were two sets of slowly fading footsteps as he and Barty left her standing there. Hermione waited until they were gone before rounding the corner.

A thin girl with long, dirty-blonde hair and protuberant, tearful eyes spun round to face her. She wore a pair of dangling earrings with sunflower pendants and had a blue badge with a bronze “*P*” on it pinned to the front of her robes.

“Oh,” she said softly. “Have you been so close all this time?”

“I’m sorry,” said Hermione, with a pang of guilt. “I was just meeting with the headmaster. I had no intention of eavesdropping.”

“No, no.” The girl smiled weakly, wiping away a few stray tears. “It is I who should apologise. No one should have to hear such unpleasantness. I’m Pandora Abbott,” she added, in an admirable attempt at brightness. She offered her hand.

This is the mother of Luna Lovegood, Hermione thought in astonishment, shaking it gently.

“Mione Greenwood,” she said.

“I know,” said Pandora. “You’re very popular, especially in Ravenclaw Tower. I suspect a few of my peers are a tad envious of you.”

It may have been worrisome just how pleased that information made Hermione.

“It appears that I’m suddenly in need of a new friend,” Pandora told her, with a sorrowful sigh. “I wonder if you would allow me to join you in the library sometime? Assuming you’re not opposed to sharing your knowledge, that is.”

“Not at all,” said Hermione. “I’d like that very much, actually.”

Pandora beamed.

“Lovely,” she said, beginning to back away, her gaze still fixed on Hermione. “I am very grateful to have made your acquaintance, Mione Greenwood.”

“Believe me,” said Hermione honestly, “the feeling is mutual.”

*

Pandora Abbott first joined Hermione in the library three days later. She found her there with Remus and Mary on Thursday afternoon and introduced herself with a warm smile before taking the seat that Lily typically sat in.

Mary took to her almost immediately; Pandora did not have the same dottiness about her as her daughter one day would and was therefore much easier to get along with. She did, however, admit to having an interest in the conspiracy theories of Xenophilius Lovegood, who was in the seventh year and never failed to grate on Remus' nerves.

Pandora's presence was strangely comforting to Hermione. She was, like Remus (and even Sirius, James, and Lily, to some extent), a piece of home. Sometimes Hermione got the feeling that Pandora knew that.

It was not until the following week that Regulus and Barty discovered their newfound friendship. They were searching through the history section of the library when they came across Hermione and Pandora's table. Barty narrowed his eyes at them for a second, but then carried on as though they were of no importance to him. Regulus, however, paused.

Pandora looked up at him hopefully, but he only opened his mouth, hastily shut it, grimacing, and hurried after Barty. She sighed, turning back to Hermione.

"Sometimes people are only destined to be in your life for a short period of time," she said, with the wisdom of someone who had lived for a hundred years. "I will mourn them, even if they do not mourn me."

Those words struck something within Hermione, and she found herself thinking back on them often in the days that followed. She, too, was mourning, in a way, even if those she mourned were not dead and would not have the chance to mourn her in return.

She could see her pain clearly demonstrated by Lily, who had long since stopped coming to the library. She rarely spoke, rarely smiled, and almost always avoided the Great Hall, choosing to let James take her down to the kitchens instead. She dragged her feet when she walked more often than not and took tea in Professor McGonagall's office when she lost the strength to be around her friends.

Hermione, in turn, spent the majority of her time with Remus. He was different from the man she knew from her own time, more confident, for one, but he was still the same person, the same friend, and she loved him. She doubted she had felt this strongly about him before, but she could not help it when he was always there, always smiling at her, and always looking out for her.

She began to visit him in the hospital wing in the mornings after full moons, and he let her, despite not wanting anyone to see him in that state. She would pull up a chair, take off her shoes, rest her feet on his bed, and tell him make-believe stories (ones she had learnt from her numerous nieces and nephews) to distract from the pain and the taste of the potions Madam Pomfrey made him drink.

Partway through February, when Remus gave himself a new scar — a thin white line that sliced through his left eyebrow — Hermione wept, but she still thought he looked just as

handsome as he had before, and told him so.

There were days on which they walked to class with her hand in his, and twice she had fallen asleep on the sofa in the common room, her head resting on his shoulder and his arm around her waist. She breathed easier knowing that she was cared for, even if it was as more than a friend. She wished he did not feel that way about her — that he did not watch her fondly while she studied or laugh especially hard when she told a joke — but, at the same time, she refused to give him up.

Not when she needed him so badly.

Hermione was certain that she would have lost her mind if Remus were not there; she would have been screaming at the sky by the end of her first month in the seventies, cursing Theodore Nott for putting her in this situation, and she would probably be doing just that when he left.

So, she didn't say anything when Remus pressed a kiss to the top of her head while they sat in the common room amongst the rest of Gryffindor House, who were celebrating yet another successful Quidditch match under James' guidance, and she told herself that Ron would not mind, even if it were a lie.

"I need a cigarette," Remus said abruptly, putting down his bottle of butterbeer that was, in reality, filled with firewhiskey.

Hermione shot him an unimpressed look, to which he gave an unrepentant grin. Shaking her head in exasperation, she followed him over to the window and leaned sideways against the wall, taking a small sip of her own firewhiskey while he lit his cigarette with his wand.

"I should sneak into your dormitory one night and Vanish your supply," she told him, only half-joking.

Remus chuckled, letting out a puff of smoke.

"I would just nick Sirius's," he said. "And if you Vanished *his*, he would sneak out of the castle to buy more. You wouldn't want him breaking such rules, would you?"

"First of all, I would have Lily put him in detention, scrubbing the bedpans in the hospital wing without magic," said Hermione, very matter-of-factly. "And second of all, you, Remus Lupin, are quite possibly the world's worst prefect."

"Perhaps, but I have my fun."

Smiling, she turned to face the common room, her back against the wall, and kept drinking, her insides warming with every sip. James had Lily on his lap and was switching her firewhiskey out for a glass of water. Hermione suspected their relationship would be official any day now. On the armchair next to them, Sirius and Marlene were attempting to suck each other's faces off. They, on the other hand, were still not in what one could reasonably call a relationship; just last week Marlene had caught him in a broom cupboard with a sixth-year Ravenclaw and had, according to Mary, gotten revenge by sneaking off with the Keeper for

the Hufflepuff Quidditch team, who dressed androgynously enough that Hermione was not actually clear on their gender.

“Mione?”

“Yes?” Hermione said, looking back at Remus. He had put out his cigarette and was watching her with a soft expression.

“If I were to kiss you right now,” he said, in a voice barely above a whisper, “would you let me?”

“You’re drunk,” she said, a sharp pang in her chest. “We both are.”

“Not that drunk.”

“Your breath reeks of lung cancer.”

Remus nodded slowly, his eyes narrowed, then nodded again, mostly to himself. He took her hand and made his way towards the stairs leading up to the boys’ dormitories. This was the part at which she was supposed to turn around, Hermione knew, but she did not, just like the last time he had led her up there. He opened the door to the boys’ lavatory, and she walked in without protest. Her stomach was all aflutter, and she wondered if it was nerves or if, somehow, his feelings were contagious, and it was her own fault for perhaps sharing in some small part of them. If she did, she did not want to know.

He released her hand, approached the sinks, picked up a discarded toothbrush that she hoped was his own, and began brushing his teeth. She could not help but laugh, moving to sit herself on the countertop beside him.

“You really want to kiss me that badly?” she asked, curious.

Remus could not answer, but he gave her a look that implied she was stupid for even asking; Hermione thought he looked quite precious with toothpaste dripping down his chin. He spit in the sink, set down his toothbrush, and wiped his face on his sleeve before coming to stand in front of her, his hands gripping the counter on either side.

He had such an earnest expression on his face that Hermione’s heart might have stopped beating for a split second.

“Can I kiss you now?” he asked.

“I’m sorry, Remus,” she said sadly, “but no.”

Remus sighed, dropping his head to rest it on her shoulder. She wrapped her arms around him, threading a hand through his sandy hair.

“I had a feeling you’d say that,” he mumbled, returning her embrace. He was silent for a minute, his face buried in her neck, before then asking, “If it weren’t for him — if it weren’t for Bilius — would your answer be different?”

Hermione considered that for a long moment. Remus wasn't even eighteen yet and wouldn't be for another two weeks; she may have been only a few months older than him due to the De-Ageing Potion, but that fact still bothered her. There was also the constant reminder of the husband that she had left behind which hung from her neck. She had no intention of becoming an adulterer; she loved Ron, and she had for so many years that her love for him had by now become an integral part of who she was. However, if she let herself — if she ignored all of that for just a second — then she thought, perhaps —

"Yes."

"Then I'll ask again in a month," Remus told her determinedly. "And if you still say no, I'll ask again the month after that. And the month after that, and the one after that, until you say yes."

Hermione drew a shaky breath. She nodded.

"OK."

That night was spent tossing and turning after a dream in which Ron had thrown his wedding ring in her face. Still, she greeted Remus with a hug and a kiss on the cheek when the morning came, hating herself, and doing it, anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Right, so I want to make this super, super clear. When I say Hermione loves Remus, I do not mean romantically; he is the closest thing she has to the family and the life she's left behind (I don't believe she would've been very close to Sirius in this particular set of circumstances, although reading that pairing is a very unguilty pleasure of mine), and clinging to him is all she can do to not fall off the deep end. She loves Ron, she does not wish to cheat on Ron (hence the dream of guilt), but she's currently doing her best to keep Remus close, whatever that might entail. Keeping Remus close means maintaining that same closeness with those she's left behind.

Adolescent Animals

Chapter Summary

> To all the smirkin' faces and the boys in black
> Why can't they be pleasant? Why can't they have a laugh?
> He's got his hand in your chest, he wants to give you a duff
> Well, secretly I think they want you all to kick off
> They want arms flying everywhere and bottles as well
> It's just something to talk about, a story to tell, yeah
> — From the Ritz to the Rubble, Arctic Monkeys

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is a little on the chaotic side, and just may be my favourite yet. I hope you like it:)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first of March would have been Ron's forty-first birthday had it not been for the fact that Hermione was now in 1978 and he would not be born for another two years. Nevertheless, she visited the kitchens after dinner and politely asked one of the house-elves to bake her a chocolate cake with orange frosting and an astounding forty-one candles on it. When she managed to blow them all out, she wished that she would be able to return to the exact second that she had left so that he wouldn't have the chance to miss her as she did him, then took her first bite of cake and wondered if the Chudley Cannons were as poor a team now as they were in the future.

Remus turned eighteen nine days later. To celebrate, the Gryffindor seventh-years (barring Frank and Alice, who were unamused by their antics) snuck out to visit a pub in central London. Lily had been nearly apoplectic with rage when James had revealed the Marauder's Map to them on their way to the One-Eyed Witch's passageway.

"*This* is how you kept finding me?" she had exclaimed. "Have we no privacy at all?"

Sirius had shaken his head in response, earning himself a smack on the arm.

The last full moon had been on the twenty-third of February and the next one was not for another two weeks; as such, Remus was in abnormally high spirits. He was holding Hermione's hand and swinging it back and forth between them as they entered the crowded pub, grinning from ear to ear.

The only available booth large enough for the eight of them was at the very back and appeared to have not been cleaned all evening. Marlene scrunched up her face in disgust and flicked a chip off the bench before sitting down.

“First round is on Uncle Alphard!” Sirius said loudly, and he headed straight for the bar, dragging Peter with him.

“Lily, don’t be like that,” James said imploringly when he attempted to put his arm around Lily, only to have her turn away from him, huffing. “I solemnly swear that I only ever used the Map for good.”

Remus and Hermione both made noises of amusement. Lily shot James a furious look.

“How do I know you haven’t used it to find me in — say — the Prefects’ bath?” she said jerkily. “You could’ve used a Disillusionment Charm to spy on me!”

“I have never spied on you while invisible,” said James, with an admittedly impressive straight face, just as Sirius and Peter returned with drinks. The latter tripped over his own two feet, snickering, and spilt half a pint on himself.

Lily glanced at him, then at James, and said coolly, “I’m calling bullshit.”

“Padfoot, back me up!”

“No,” said Sirius, sliding into the booth next to Remus. Lily stole James’ pint the second Sirius handed it to him and took a long drink while he pouted at her.

“Sirius, have you ever spied on me while invisible?” asked Marlene.

“Of course not. I’m a gentleman.”

She shared an unimpressed look with Lily.

“We’re surrounded by animals.”

Remus choked, James went into a coughing fit, Sirius sniggered, and beer shot out of Peter’s nose, spraying the already filthy table.

Hermione had to press a hand to her mouth to keep from laughing.

“Good God,” Mary muttered, shaking her head.

“You are a pathetic excuse for a boyfriend,” Lily told James flatly.

“Boyfriend?” he repeated dumbly.

“That’s what you are, is it not?”

“No, yeah — yes. Yes, I am your boyfriend.” James nodded his head so rapidly that Hermione worried he was making himself dizzy. “Seeing as I’m your boyfriend, will you go

to Hogsmeade with me tomorrow?"

"No," said Lily, taking another sip of his pint, and only once his face had fallen did she add, "but you can go with me."

James pushed his glasses up with a wriggle of his nose and grinned. He then attempted, once more, to put his arm around her; Lily elbowed him in the ribs.

Clearing his throat pointedly, Remus draped an arm over Hermione's shoulders; James glared at him.

"You're lucky it's your birthday," he said darkly.

"Right," said Marlene abruptly, clapping her hands to gather everyone's attention. "Shall we play a game?"

"Who Did the Niffler Steal From?" said Sirius, raising an eyebrow in question, and she immediately shook her head. "Why the hell not?"

"You four already know all each other's secrets. You have an unfair advantage."

Lily and Mary nodded in agreement.

"The last time we played that game with you lot," said the latter, "I wound up retching on our dormitory floor."

"What's Who Did the Niffler Steal From?" asked Hermione, nonplussed.

"It's a drinking game. How it works is everyone takes turns being the Niffler," Sirius explained, "and on your turn, you share a secret that you stole from someone else. If we can rightly guess who the secret belongs to, you've got to drink. And if someone shares *your* secret, you can't say anything."

She could see how he, Remus, James, and Peter could easily win that if they wanted to.

"Good Sphinx or Bad Sphinx?" suggested Remus hopefully.

"Absolutely not," said James firmly, and nearly everyone nodded in agreement. "That game is hard enough as it is, and it just gets worse the more you drink."

"Veritaserum or Boggart?"

"I haven't drunk nearly enough to talk about my mother, Moony," said Sirius, with a rough shake of his head. He took a long sip of his pint and smacked his lips. "Let's just play Who Did the Niffler Steal From. I'll go first. As a second-year, this person broke into Sluggy's classroom to draw hearts all over the essay that the person they fancied handed in. Who did I steal from?"

"James," said everyone at once, and Sirius drank until his glass was empty. He then kicked James under the table and demanded that he get them a round of shots.

“This person has checked out *Quidditch Through the Ages* fifteen times in the last six years,” said Peter, looking smug. “Who did I steal from?”

“James again?”

He shook his head.

“Padfoot?”

“Nope.”

“My brother?”

“Afraid not.”

“Then who the hell was it?”

Peter grinned.

“Marlene,” he said.

When James returned, everyone but Peter took a shot, Marlene doing so whilst blushing furiously. It was then James’ turn.

“When this person was six years old, they wet their pants during one of their mother’s tea parties, and they were never allowed to attend again. Who did I steal from?”

Mary slammed her hand down on the table excitedly, shouting, “Frank!”

James finished off the pint Lily had stolen from him and belched loudly, causing her to wrinkle her nose at him. They continued going around in a circle until there was nothing left to drink, and Sirius had to order another few rounds of shots (“Uncle Alphard loves me dearly, don’t worry yourselves about it.”). Then it was Hermione’s turn. She had to think for a while, given that she had only met them all a few months ago, but she did have the advantage of knowing some of their future selves.

“This person had Muggle posters of bikini-clad girls posing on motorcycles in their childhood bedroom. Who did I steal from?”

Sirius stared at her in shock.

“Who the fuck told you that?”

“Pandora Abbott,” lied Hermione. “She used to be friends with your brother.”

“I think Sirius should drink for ruining that one,” said Lily authoritatively.

Sirius grumbled to himself, shooting Hermione a look of annoyance, but drank all the same.

“This person,” Remus began, seemingly unable to keep the mirth out of his voice, “brewed Polyjuice Potion at thirteen simply because they were — and I quote — ‘an exceedingly

curious child.' Who did I steal from?"

James gasped, turning to Lily with an expression of utmost betrayal. "You never told me that!"

"It wasn't me!" she said, throwing her hands up.

He narrowed his eyes.

"Was it Snivellus?"

"No, it was not," said Remus gloatingly. He glanced around, absently twirling a lock of Hermione's hair. "Any other guesses? No? Drink up."

They all took a shot, even Hermione, and then Lily demanded to know whose secret it was. In answer, Remus pointed to Hermione with his free hand.

"You naughty witch," Lily said, in awe.

"Polyjuice Potion …" Sirius murmured to himself thoughtfully, scratching his chin. He squinted at Hermione. "Hypothetically —"

"No," said Lily.

"Bad doggie," said James, picking up a discarded menu and whacking Sirius on the nose with it. "Don't talk about brewing illegal potions in front of the Head Boy and Girl."

"I said, *hypothetically* —"

"No."

Sirius heaved a great sigh, slumping back in his seat. By the time the group had collectively grown bored of their game, he was incapable of sitting back up. Peter had won and was now the most sober. It had been a little unsettling, in truth, just how good he was at the game. Each of his stolen secrets had left them all dumbfounded as to how he could possibly know them, such as, "This person was in the hospital wing for three days in fourth year for using an Enlargement Charm on something they shouldn't have," (Tiberius McLaggen), "Last month, this person took such a massive dump that the house-elves had to unclog the toilet for them," (Professor Slughorn) or, "This person got fingered under the Quidditch stands during the Quidditch Final last year," (Preciosa Parkinson).

Stumbling slightly, Lily dragged James from the booth by his ear, declaring that she would die of misery if she did not dance to the ABBA song that was currently playing. Marlene attempted to coax Sirius into dancing with her, but such movement was beyond him at the moment, so she asked a particularly good-looking Muggle sitting in the next booth instead. Mary then curled up like a cat, her head on Hermione's lap, and began singing along to *Does Your Mother Know*, her eyes half-open.

"When James inevitably proposes to Lily," Hermione said, toying with the tight curls of Mary's hair, "he should do so at an ABBA concert." Her eyes widened in horror, and she

quickly added, “Just as long as they don’t play *Fernando*.”

“What’s wrong with *Fernando*?” asked Remus, frowning.

“Erm … right, so … no … no, I’m not going to say. It’s very bad. A good song, but … very bad.”

“You want another, Padfoot?” asked Peter abruptly, getting to his feet.

“Yes!” said Sirius eagerly, at the same time that Remus and Hermione both said, “No.”

Mary murmured a quiet, “Very bad,” in support.

“Piss off,” said Sirius, flapping his hand in Remus’ face ineffectively. “Wormtail is gettin’ me another drink … ‘cause he’s a true friend … unlike — unlike *you*, Moony.”

Hermione wanted to cry. She took Mary’s abandoned shot, but all it did was make her eyes water, which was very unhelpful.

“Padfoot, if you puke,” said Remus, swiftly removing the empty glass from Hermione’s hand and setting it back down on the table, “I will not hold your hair back.”

Sirius reached over to yank Mary’s headband off her head and place it on his own before staggering to his feet and making his way towards the lavatories; Mary placed a hand over her head protectively, whimpering.

“Well,” said Peter awkwardly, “I suppose I’ll just get a drink for myself, then.” He picked up Sirius’ leather jacket, which had been left on his seat, dug out a few pounds, and left for the bar.

“Sometimes my friends make me feel very old,” said Remus lightly.

Hermione smacked his thigh. “You are not old,” she said sternly. “You don’t even have any wrinkles.”

“I have a couple of grey hairs.”

“It’s the cigarettes. They age you.”

“I could actually use a smoke right about —”

“I will strangle you.”

“But it’s my birthday,” said Remus sulkily. “You can’t strangle somebody on their birthday. That’d be rude.”

“I don’t care,” said Hermione. “I’ll do it, anyway.”

“Will that be my birthday present from you?” He pressed his forehead against her own, his hand digging into her hair and grasping the back of her neck, and lowered his voice. “Death

by strangulation?"

"No, you're right," she whispered, her breath leaving her as she met his gaze. His eyes were green, but not like Lily's and Harry's; Remus' were lighter: sage. She blinked, returning to herself, and hastily put some space between them. "That'd be rude."

Remus frowned slightly, but straightened up, tilting his head away from her and raising an eyebrow.

"So, what are you going to give me for my birthday?"

"I cannot believe you would allude to such a thing in Mary's presence. She's a child, Remus."

"What am I alluding to, Mione?"

Hermione opened her mouth, then hastily shut it, glaring at him. He let out a small chuckle, then fell silent, eyeing her with a sombre expression.

"I was going to ask you again," he admitted.

"It hasn't even been a month yet."

"I was going to ask you, anyway, but the answer is still very clearly *no*, so I'm won't. I'm sorry, it was never my intention to make you uncomfortable."

"You haven't, it's just —" Hermione swallowed thickly, "— it's too soon."

Remus nodded, giving her a small smile to communicate that he understood. Hermione pressed a kiss to each of his cheeks and he dropped his head to rest it on the back of the booth, sighing.

"I s'ppose it'll do," he murmured.

"I was gone for *two minutes*." Peter dropped onto the bench opposite, slamming a pint down on the table. "*Two minutes,* Moony."

Remus shrugged one shoulder and removed his hand from Hermione's hair.

"It's my birthday."

"Yes, Peter," said Hermione tersely, "it's his birthday. So hush."

Mary hiccoughed. Peter leaned across the table to peer down at her, then sat back, pulling a face, and said, "I don't want to be the third-wheel."

"Well, Padfoot's —" Remus paused. "Actually, we should go check on him." He slid out of the booth, taking Hermione with him.

“Guard Mary with your life, Peter!” Hermione shouted over her shoulder as they walked away, “or I’ll kill you with my bare hands!”

“Strangulation?” asked Remus.

“What? No! That’d be — er — too quick.”

He laughed, using the hand that wasn’t on her shoulder to push open the door to the men’s lavatory. The door would not budge, however. They both stared at it blankly.

“There’s no … there’s no knob. He can’t have locked it.”

“Sticking Charm?”

Remus reached into his pocket and withdrew his wand. “Let’s hope no one from the Improper Use of Magic Office picks up on this,” he muttered, and silently cast the counter-spell. He then tucked his wand away and pushed on the door, sighing in relief when it swung open.

The second he and Hermione entered the lavatory, they knew that the Sticking Charm had been necessary, for Sirius was not there.

But Padfoot was.

“Oh, dear,” Hermione said, staring at the large, black dog that was hunched over the nearest urinal, dry-heaving. “Sirius … this is not the time for that.”

Remus swore loudly and hurried forwards to yank Padfoot away from the urinal, dropping to his knees in order to better restrain him. Mary’s headband toppled onto the floor as Padfoot tilted his head up to lick the side of his face, and Remus turned away, gagging.

“So — er — the next time we play Who Did the Niffler Steal From,” he said, panting now as he fought to keep Padfoot from returning to the urinal, “don’t use this.”

The door began to open behind Hermione, and she quickly leaned against it, effectively keeping whoever was on the other side from gaining entry. They banged on the door, and she called out, “Occupied!”

There was a small pause, then she heard James’ voice say, “Mione, this is the men’s lavatory.”

Relieved, she opened the door a crack to let him in. James had barely taken two steps before Padfoot escaped Remus’ hold and leapt on top of him, knocking him to the floor and slobbering all over him.

“Bloody hell, Padfoot! Geroff me!”

“This is bad,” said Remus, burying his face in his hands. “This is very, very bad.”

Hermione leaned back against the door again, raising an eyebrow at him. “Just use the Animagus reversal spell,” she said. “It shouldn’t be so difficult.”

Remus, James, and Padfoot all looked up at her sharply.

“There’s a reversal spell?”

She gaped at them.

“You let him become an Animagus without first ensuring you could use a counter-spell to change him back in the event of an emergency?”

Padfoot jerked his head up and down in confirmation.

“Well, what’s the incantation?” asked James impatiently, wiping his face on his sleeve. When Hermione winced, he looked at her in disbelief. “You don’t know?”

“I’ve only ever seen it performed non-verbally!” she said defensively.

“Right.” James got to his feet, shoving Padfoot aside, and went over to the line of urinals, unzipping his trousers. “You two sort it out, I’ve gotta piss.”

Remus dropped back onto his elbows, watching helplessly as Padfoot darted into one of the stalls and started heaving again.

“Sirius,” said Hermione curtly, “change back.”

“I don’t believe he can.”

Someone attempted to open the door again, and she panicked, pressing all her weight against it.

“If you two are snogging in there —” Peter began warily, and she rolled her eyes, letting him inside. He glanced from James, pissing, to Remus, on the floor, and finally to Padfoot, retching. “Well, this is slightly problematic.”

“No shit.”

“Can he not change back?”

“Apparently not.”

“Why haven’t you used the Animagus reversal spell?”

James spun round to stare at him, open-mouthed, his trousers still undone, and Hermione shielded her eyes, grimacing; she had not needed to see that.

“Prongs, put your prong away.”

She waited until she heard a zipper before lowering her hand. Peter took out his wand and approached Padfoot’s stall. Aiming it at him, he said, *“Animagi conversionem!”* There was a flash of bright, blue light, and they all watched as Padfoot grew, his shaggy hair vanishing, and Sirius appeared in his place, groaning miserably, and clutching his stomach.

“We ought to learn that spell,” declared Remus.

Sirius nodded, resting his head on the ominously stained seat of the toilet. Hermione Conjured a goblet and filled it with water from one of the sinks before kneeling beside him and forcing him to drink. He shook his head after a few sips, jerking back.

“You need water, Sirius,” she snapped. “Drink or I will make you drink.”

“Bossy,” he muttered bitterly, taking the goblet. Remus tossed Mary’s headband at him, and he picked it up, bewildered. “Where the hell’d you get this?”

Hermione looked up at Peter, infuriated.

“*Did you leave Mary alone*?”

“‘Course not. Lily’s with her.”

“Ah, lovely,” said Remus, “now you don’t have to kill him.”

“I could.”

“Why would you kill Wormtail?” James asked Hermione, bemused.

Her eyes darted from Sirius to Remus, and then to James, before finally landing on Peter. “Padfoot … Moony … Prongs … Wormtail …” She feigned thoughtfulness. “You know, on my first day here, I found a rat sneaking into my dormitory. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you, Peter?”

Peter gulped fearfully.

“He was doing some reconn’ssance,” slurred Sirius, and Hermione tore the goblet from his grasp and dumped its contents on his head. He spluttered, shaking his head like a dog and spraying her with water.

“Well, you did fracture his spine,” said Remus rationally, “so I think he’s been sufficiently punished.”

“If I ever catch you lurking about the girls’ dormitories again,” Hermione told Peter warningly, “it’ll be the window I toss you out of.”

“All right, let’s stop talking about all the ways you want to kill Peter.” Remus stood with James’ assistance, and went to help Hermione up. “Lily’s probably wondering what’s taking us so long.”

As they neared their booth, the five of them stopped in their tracks just in time to avoid Marlene’s swinging arm as she punched the man she had been dancing with on the jaw.

“Marlene!” Lily shrieked, leaping in front of her. “*I* was going to do that!” She then wound up and punched him on the nose; the man stumbled backwards, shouting out, and was caught by one of his friends.

"*You fucking bitch*!"

"Absolutely fucking not," said James, looking livid, and he thrust Sirius into Peter's arms before lunging forwards, tackling both men to the ground. Sirius did not remain in Peter's grasp for long; he, too, dove to the floor, swiftly trapping one of the men in a headlock. The other pub-goers gathered around them, egging them on, and Lily and Marlene took to kicking whatever part of the two Muggles they could reach.

Hermione squeezed her way through the crowd to get to Mary, who was lying unconscious in the empty booth. She carefully lifted her into her arms, stumbling slightly, and passed her off to Remus the second he reached them.

"OI! NONE O' THAT!" bellowed an old man with a receding hairline from behind the bar. The alarmingly large man beside him cracked his knuckles threateningly. "TAKE IT OUTSIDE!"

Lily and Marlene grasped James and Sirius by the arms and forced them to their feet while three men banded together to restrain the two whom they had been fighting. Hermione and Peter collected everyone's belongings from the booth and hurriedly followed the others out the door.

James' glasses had been lost at some point during the brawl; he had blood dripping from his nose and a bruise blooming on his jaw. Sirius, meanwhile, had a split lip, and his left eye was swelling rapidly.

"Any of you care to fill us in on what the fuck just happened?" Remus said, his voice a near-shout. He adjusted his grip on Mary, scowling at them all.

"That *bastard*," Lily spat, fuming, "was making all these *vile* comments about Mary and how *easy* it would be to take advantage of her in the state she's in!"

"*What*?"

Hermione promptly turned on the spot, heading straight back into the pub. She barely made it through the door before James was yanking her back.

"You can't use magic on them," he said, wrapping an arm around her middle when she made for the door again, "and let's face it, you're too tiny to take a single one of them in a fight."

"Prongs!" yelled Sirius. "Get in there an' stab 'em with your antlers!"

"No!" exclaimed Remus, wide-eyed in alarm. "Don't do that!"

"Yeah, I'm too pretty for Azkaban, mate," said James, hauling a still struggling Hermione away from the pub door. "Somebody summon the Knight Bus. There's no bloody way any of us can Apparate right now."

Marlene stepped out onto the street, taking out her wand. With an ear-splitting *BANG,* a violently purple triple-decker bus appeared before them, *screeching* to a halt. The doors opened and a lanky wizard slumped out, yawning widely.

“Welcome to the Knight Bus,” he said mechanically, “emergency transport for the stranded witch or —”

“Just take us to Hogsmeade, yeah?” said Marlene shortly, shouldering past him. He tripped, clutching his hat, and toppled out onto the street. Lily stopped to help him, apologising profusely, while Sirius took a handful of Sickles from his pocket and threw them on the ground.

“Would it have killed you to hand that to him like a normal person?” said Hermione, as they stepped onto the bus, glowering at Sirius upside down from her position slung over James’ shoulder. Sirius simply shrugged and wobbled forward, collapsing on the nearest bed, which happened to be occupied.

“Oh,” he said in surprise, looking up at the bandy-legged, ginger wizard with bloodshot eyes whose lap he was currently resting his head on, “good to see yeh, Dung.”

Mundungus Fletcher patted him on the cheek, sniggering.

“Nice shiner, mate.”

“Cheers. Hey, listen, have you got any —?”

“Sirius, you are not buying pot!” Lily screeched, and Sirius and Mundungus looked at her, aghast. She glanced round sheepishly. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to say that so loudly.”

Hermione laughed as James set her down on the next bed. *Only Sirius Black,* she thought ruefully, *would invite his dealer to join a top-secret organisation created to take down a dark lord.*

Mary was placed beside her. Hermione took her into her arms, chortling still.

“Righ’, then,” the conductor said gruffly, climbing back onto the bus. He appeared rather discombobulated and rubbed the side of his head, wincing. “Any o’ yous need a bucket?”

Without missing a beat, Hermione, Remus, James, and Peter all pointed to Sirius (although James’ aim was off by about a foot).

“Shocking, that,” the conductor muttered sarcastically, turning away to fetch the bucket. After passing it to James, who flung it at Sirius, he tapped on the driver’s shoulder. “Take ‘er away.”

With a great jolt that sent James, Remus, and Peter all flying backwards and another deafening *BANG*, the Knight Bus took off, heading down a street in a distinctly dodgy part of London. Marlene, who was sitting comfortably on a bed with Lily on her lap, snickered.

“Guess what, Dung?” said Sirius excitedly, hugging the bucket to his chest. “Prongs n’ me got in a pub brawl!”

“Oi!” said Marlene, outraged. “I was the one who started it!”

“And I helped!” said Lily, equally outraged.

The two exchanged a significant look and said, in agreement, “Tosser.”

“Who’re you callin’ a tosser?” demanded Sirius.

“I’d thought that’d be rather obvious.”

“Really, it couldn’t be anyone but you.”

“Sometimes when someone says the word *tosser*,” said Lily, “you look up as though they’ve called your name.”

“It’s true,” said Remus, as he and James sat down on the bed next to her and Marlene’s. “I’ve witnessed it myself.”

James nodded grimly, slightly cross-eyed as he struggled to locate their faces.

“If it makes you feel any better,” said Peter, still on the floor of the bus, “Snivellus looks up whenever someone says, ‘greasy.’”

“Are you taking the piss?”

“We should follow him round under the Cloak an’ whisper, ‘greasy,’ over an’ over again. That’d be a laugh.”

“What cloak?”

Sirius stuck his head inside the bucket to avoid answering. This turned out to be a blessing, because when the bus came to a stop to let Mundungus off, he wound up vomiting.

“You’ve a good one, Sirius,” Mundungus said with a chuckle, slapping him on the back. He saluted James and not a second after he had stepped off the bus did it set off once more. There were three more stops before they finally reached Hogsmeade. James slipped the conductor a couple of Sickles — which took a minute since he kept missing the conductor’s hand — so that they could take the bucket with them. Gradually, they made their way up High Street.

“You reckon we could levitate her the rest of the way there?” Remus asked Hermione, nodding to Mary, whom he was carrying on his back; she had woken up towards the end of their journey, but had the balance of a newborn foal.

“Win—ger—dee—um Levi—oh—so,” she slurred, giggling. “A swishy an’ a flicky!”

“That’s right, Mary,” said Hermione encouragingly. “Swish and flick.” She looked back at Remus. “I think it’d be best to just leave her as she is, honestly.”

Sirius began humming the tune to *Mary Had a Little Lamb*. Where he had learnt that song, Hermione had no clue.

“James, the castle is *this* way,” said Lily exasperatedly, grabbing James’ elbow and steering him in the right direction.

“S’not my fault,” he said grumpily. “I can’t even see your lovely face right now.”

“It’s a good thing you don’t like me solely for my looks, then.”

“‘Course not, love. You’re also wickedly smart, funny … exceptionally kind … powerful, too … an’ you could kick my arse if you wanted to, as you’ve proven many times.”

Hermione wondered if all Potter men were attracted to those who could take them in a fight: as far as she knew, the only people Harry had ever fancied were Quidditch players whose talent nearly rivalled his own; Albus Severus had a taste for older women (and she suspected men, too); and, according to Hugo, James Sirius had developed a habit of staring at the same girl whom Rose was always squabbling with. Lily Luna, on the other hand, was twelve years old and thought the sole purpose of the opposite sex was target practice.

Sneaking into Honeydukes proved to be quite the challenge while intoxicated. Sirius accidentally dropped his bucket and Marlene, plugging her nose, had to use a Vanishing Charm in order to get rid of an entire shelf of now uneatable Sugar Quills; Mary grabbed every sweet within reach and stuffed them down Remus’ jumper for safekeeping, seemingly unaware of the fact that they continued to fall out the bottom and onto the floor; Peter slipped in a puddle of Sirius’ vomit and Hermione was forced to cast a Silencing Charm on Sirius so that his bark of laughter would not alert anyone to their presence; James kept bumping into things no matter how hard Lily tried to keep him walking in a straight line; and Remus nearly dropped Mary when he spotted the collection of giant chocolate bars in the cellar.

“Swish and flick!” Mary cried in delight, somehow managing to draw her wand. “*Wingardium Leviosa*!” One of the chocolate bars rose into the air and proceeded to follow them down into the passageway below.

Oh, Hermione thought, embarrassed, *Levitating it would’ve been so much easier*. One of those Muggle-born moments, she supposed.

It took about fifteen minutes to reach the end of the dark passageway. Hermione drew her wand and said, “*Ascendio*!” to lift herself up out of the One-Eyed Witch’s hump. One by one, the others joined her in the empty third-floor corridor, and they started in the direction of Gryffindor Tower, mindful to keep their voices down.

James began fiddling with the Marauder’s Map as they climbed one of the moving staircases to verify that the caretaker — who was still Argus Filch in this era — was elsewhere. He struggled to sort out which side of the blank parchment was the front, twirling his wand in his other hand as he repeatedly flipped it over in befuddlement —

“My, my, what have we here?”

They all jumped, startled, and turned to find Filch standing at the foot of the stairs with a menacing glint in his pale eyes, his chapped lips twisting into a cruel smile. He stepped onto the staircase just as it began to move.

“We’re very sorry, Mr Filch,” Remus said calmly. “We’d been studying in the old Charms classroom — N.E.W.T. preparation, you understand — and we completely lost track of time.”

“Yes, we were practising the Confundus Charm at one point,” Hermione lied smoothly. “We wanted to see how it would work on inanimate objects, so we tried it out on our watches. It kept us from being able to tell time, you see.”

Filch glanced from Sirius’ and James’ bruised and bloodied faces to the vomit on Peter’s trousers, then to Mary, who was leaning heavily on Marlene, and sneered at them.

“I don’t think so. You lot are comin’ with me.” He stepped forwards and tore the Map from James’ grasp. “And I’ll be takin’ this! Probably a tool you’ve been using for your nefarious schemes!”

“Our schemes are hardly nefarious, sir,” said James, his voice cracking horribly. He reached for the Map, his expression one of extreme panic, and missed, nearly falling. Filch stepped back, cackling, and Sirius began cursing silently. Peter pressed his hands to his cheeks, reminding Hermione of the painting, *The Scream*.

Ten minutes later, they were standing in the Deputy Headmistress’ Office being shouted at by an irate Professor McGonagall in her tartan dressing gown. She took a hundred points from Gryffindor House, banned them from Hogsmeade indefinitely, and assigned them all detention for the rest of the month. Hermione had not even known that Head students could be given detention. The only brightside was that Professor McGonagall awarded her five points for using a Silencing Charm on Sirius, claiming that her efforts were for the good of the community.

“All in all,” Remus said blithely as they left, returning to Gryffindor Tower at a snail’s pace, “I’d say this has been a pretty good birthday.”

Chapter End Notes

That Mundungus Fletcher was expelled for dealing drugs is my personal headcannon, and I am very attached to it.

And no, I most certainly did not spend half an hour coming up with a variety of wizarding drinking games, what gave you that idea?

An Undesired Offer

Chapter Summary

> Are there some aces up your sleeve?
> Have you no idea that you're in deep?
> I've dreamt about you nearly every night this week
> How many secrets can you keep?
> — Do I Wanna Know? Arctic Monkeys

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Breakfast the following morning found Hermione staring at the front page of *The Daily Prophet* in horror. Curious, Sirius peered at it from his seat beside her. His jaw dropped.

"There was a break-in at Honeydukes last night?"

Scoffing, she smacked him on the nose with the *Prophet*. "It was us, you idiot!" she said, in a hissing whisper. "*We* were the ones who broke into Honeydukes!"

"Oh, right. Good on us, then."

"Do you see this, Sirius?" Hermione said, pointing to the line at the bottom of the second paragraph. "'*Aurors suspect Death Eater involvement*!'"

"McGonagall is going to flay us alive," said James, ashen-faced. Hermione and Sirius followed his gaze to the Head table; Professor McGonagall lowered her copy of the *Prophet,* appearing on the verge of exploding.

James blinked rapidly, adjusting his glasses. He was wearing an old pair that he had found at the bottom of his trunk and the prescription was off by a longshot.

Just then, Professor Dumbledore rose from his seat. He cleared his throat and raised his hands to gather the attention of the Hall at large.

"I am sorry to announce that due to the break-in that took place in Hogsmeade last night," he said regretfully, "today's trip has been cancelled."

The Hall promptly erupted in outrage, and he quickly silenced them.

"Do not fear. Our Aurors are looking into it, and I have every faith that the perpetrators will be brought to justice in due course."

Lily made a sound that was part-whimper and part-squeak. Mary raised her head from where she had buried it in her arms, folded atop the table.

“Everyone, remain calm,” said Remus, placing a comforting hand on Mary’s shoulder. “There’s no way for him to know that it was us.”

No later that he had spoken, Professor McGonagall leaned over to whisper in Professor Dumbledore’s ear; his eyebrows shot up in surprise and he turned his head to look at them.

“I take that back. He *definitely* knows it was us.”

Hermione massaged her temples, the headache she had woken up with increasing tenfold. Sirius dropped his head onto her shoulder with a morose sigh.

“Azkaban, it is.”

Her headache worsened further.

“You can kiss your shiny badges good-bye,” Marlene said, glancing from Lily to James.

“If we catch any of you doing anything even remotely illegal after we’ve joined the Aurors,” said Frank, as he and Alice arrived at the Gryffindor table, “we won’t hesitate to arrest you.”

“Go on, I dare you,” said Marlene boldly. “We’ll tell everyone how you pissed yourself at a meeting of the Lady’s Tea Society.”

Frank turned faintly pink. He shot James and Mary accusatory looks.

“Is that why Mrs Longbottom sends you out of the house whenever she’s hosting?” Alice asked him curiously, and he nodded, going pinker still. “How old were you?”

“Six.”

“Hmph. I think I’d probably do the same to my own son. By that age, you should be able to control your bladder.”

“I was *nervous*, Alice! Those witches are mighty intimidating, I’ll have you know.”

“Not to a degree explanatory of wetting one’s pants, they’re not.”

Together, Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall left the Head table to approach their group, the latter’s eyes narrowed into slits.

Peter shrank in his seat.

When he reached them, Professor Dumbledore gave a small sigh, standing directly behind a terrified Lily. “I should think it would be a wise idea for the eight of you to join me in my office.”

Ten minutes later, they were all gathered in the Headmaster's Office with Professor McGonagall standing guard by the door, as though she thought one of them might make a mad run for it if given half the chance Professor Dumbledore sat behind his desk, his hands clasped and resting on his stomach.

"I must say that your involvement in this has come as a surprise to me," he said, "Miss Evans, Miss Macdonald, and Miss Greenwood."

"But you're not surprised by the rest of us?" asked Remus apprehensively.

"No, I cannot say that I am."

Professor McGonagall scoffed.

"Might I ask what led the eight of you to sneak out of the castle last night, and why you returned in the state that you did?"

"You see, sir, it was Remus's birthday," James began, gesturing to Remus, who quickly nodded his head, "and we wanted to celebrate."

"It was his eighteenth, Professor," Marlene put in. "A person must get sloshed on your eighteenth. It's practically the law."

Sirius sniggered.

"Whilst I do see your point, Miss McKinnon, I cannot, in good faith, agree with it," said Professor Dumbledore, sounding partly amused. He peered at her over his spectacles, his gaze distinctly knowing. "Nor, I suspect, would your mother."

Marlene went quite rigid.

"It was very irresponsible for you all to have ventured out on your own," he continued, now with a frown shamingly full of disappointment. "As you are most certainly aware, the wizarding world has regrettably not been as safe as we wish it these past several years, particularly for those individuals who face what may very well be the greatest and most unjust threat under Lord Voldemort's command."

At this, Peter, James, and Marlene all flinched. The latter two, as well as Sirius, sent glances brimming with guilt at Lily and Mary, who hung their heads.

"You could have put yourselves, and each other, in grave danger."

"I'm sorry, sir," said James, his voice heavy with regret. "We weren't thinking."

"No, you most certainly were not!" said Professor McGonagall hotly.

Professor Dumbledore held up a hand, signalling for her to stand down. He returned his gaze to the group of them, his expression one of wizened understanding that surpassed mere sympathy.

“Youth is one of the greatest treasures that life has to offer,” he said; “although some may long for it, we all ultimately find ourselves fearing its end. I fear that yours will be cut short when you leave here in June and go off to confront the world outside these walls and all its many challenges.”

His eyes lingered on Remus, and Hermione tensed beside him. He was already planning, she realised, to send Remus to parlay with the werewolf packs. He was just waiting until he graduated. Her hands clenched into fists, and she hid them behind her back, but not, it seemed, before Professor Dumbledore took notice; his brow furrowed for a fraction of a second.

“I understand why you did what you have,” he told them after a moment, “but I sincerely hope that the eight of you understand in return that this cannot happen again. The Auror Office will be notified; however, I do not believe you will be facing any legal repercussions, apart from, perhaps, a small fine, in addition to a written apology to Mr Flume for causing him such a fright. Beyond that, I will leave it to Professor McGonagall to assign an appropriate punishment.”

*

“This is demeaning,” Marlene said, leaning back in her seat. She glared at the parchment before her, on which the sentence, *I must follow the code of conduct and not act like an uneducated delinquent,* had been written nearly two-dozen times, as though thinking she could set it on fire out of pure will.

“My hand is cramping,” Peter whinged, his face twisted in dramatic agony. He glanced sidelong at Sirius, who was whistling as he wrote. “Are you seriously enjoying this?”

“I do everything Sirius-ly.”

There was an immediate chorus of exasperated groans.

“Silence!” snapped Professor McGonagall, from behind her desk at the front of the classroom. “Need I remind you once again that you have not been given permission to speak?”

“Sorry, Professor,” mumbled both Peter and Marlene, bowing their heads over their desks.

“And, Black, if you don’t quit whistling, I shall have no choice but to extend your punishment!”

“If you wanted to spend more time with me, Minnie, all you had to do was ask.”

“*Black —*”

“For heaven’s sake, Sirius,” hissed Lily, “shut up.”

Hermione, tucked out of sight with James and his broad shoulders at the desk directly in front of her, covertly took out her wand and Charmed her quill to write without assistance. Lily glanced at her, aghast. Meanwhile, Remus — who was, at least in part, hidden behind Sirius

— followed Hermione's example. He then stretched out his legs and flexed his fingers, sighing contentedly.

This was their first detention of what would be many. The day before, Lily, Remus, and Hermione had together written Ambrosius Flume a formal apology signed by all eight of them and sent it off with Lily's owl, Peppermint. The fine given to them by the Auror Office, on the other hand, had been paid in full by Mr and Mrs Potter, whose only concern had been that James and Sirius had been injured. Along with their not solely lenient but also heartily sympathetic letter, they had sent their son a new pair of glasses to replace his last and a neatly packaged chocolate cupcake to pass on to Remus, all of which had Hermione's eyebrows rising halfway to her hairline; the present-day Mr and Mrs Potter would have been livid.

Ginny would have sent James Sirius a Howler (because, really, until Albus Severus had abruptly done it under the influence of Delphini Riddle, the culprit could have only been James Sirius) and Harry would have asked Neville, as Head of Gryffindor House, to ban him from the Quidditch pitch for the rest of term. A genetic predisposition for causing chaos was all well and good, but Harry and Ginny were hardly afraid of discipline; the summer before his second year, the new broomstick James Sirius had been gifted for his birthday with the intention of it being used for Quidditch tryouts had been withheld as punishment for simultaneously breaking the International Statute of Secrecy and the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction for Underage Sorcery. In stair-stomping outrage, James Sirius' argument had been, "But *you've* done it, Dad!" to which he had been told, "Yes, and when I did, my life and my cousin's life were in danger; can you claim the same, James?" And that had been the end of that.

Had it been her own children who had gotten caught breaking and entering, Hermione, too, would have taken away broomstick privileges, in addition to grounding them for a month and prohibiting them from internet usage while visiting their grandparents' house — and this was not even considering the statement she would have had to give the press as damage control. In fact, Rose and Hugo would have likely had to make public apologies themselves, and the same could have gone for most of their cousins.

When her quill finished writing a hundred lines, Hermione picked it up, tucked it back into her bag along with her pot of ink, and stood to hand her work in to Professor McGonagall.

On her way out of the classroom, she tapped Remus on the shoulder and whispered that she would be in the library for when he, too, was done. Pandora had promised to join them there that afternoon; however, Hermione reached their usual table find it empty. Frowning, she sat down and began taking out her things. She had not even dipped her quill in ink before it was plucked from her hand; she looked up, smiling exasperatedly, but it was not Pandora who had taken the seat beside her.

It was Gaspar Avery.

"How are you this fine afternoon, Miss Greenwood?"

"What do you want?"

“Straight to the point, I see.” Avery leaned back, looking far too comfortable for her liking. He toyed with her quill. “You’ve taken us all by surprise, you know. Not that this is a bad thing, of course. It’s actually rather a good thing. Or it could be, if you let it.”

Hermione snatched her quill back. He dropped his hands calmly, smirking at her.

“None of us expected a new student to join us so late, nor did we expect that student to be as talented as you’ve proven yourself to be. It’s no secret that our lessons bore you. The material is sorely lacking — at least, to those of us who seek more than the knowledge of how to turn mice into birds or brew an antidote to cure most poisons. No one who reads *Moste Potente Potions* at thirteen purely out of curiosity could be satisfied by the magic wizards like Albus Dumbledore deem appropriate for young impressionable minds such as our own.”

Hermione drew a sharp inhale of breath and held it. She did not like the direction in which he seemed to be going.

“What if I told you there was a way to learn more?”

“No,” she said coldly.

“No?” repeated Avery, raising an eyebrow. “No, you are not interested in discovering the true extent of what magic can accomplish?”

“No, I am not interested in learning more if it means learning it from an egotistical maniac.”

His expression turned frosty.

“Your views may differ from his, but that doesn’t mean you can’t still use his knowledge to your advantage. Do you really think Dumbledore can offer you the same? He’s a powerful wizard, I’ll admit that, but he isn’t the sort to share his secrets. He will use you, and you know it.”

“And Voldemort won’t do the same?”

“Don’t you dare say his name!” Avery snapped, so loudly that Hermione was surprised Madam Pince did not come running. “He has knowledge that you could only dream of! If you had any idea of the things he could teach you —”

“The things he would teach me and then expect me to use against those he believes are unworthy of magic when he himself grew up in the very same world they did, did you mean?”

“Did Dumbledore tell you that in one of your *private meetings*?” he sneered. “What else has he told you? That your enemies can be defeated with the power of love?”

Hermione had no answer to that, and Avery continued to sneer at her, his round, blue eyes glinting with triumph.

“I knew you would be too smart to fall for that,” he said. He turned, sitting sideways on his chair, to face her head-on. “Imagine the possibilities, Greenwood. You must realise that

Dumbledore would rather make you a soldier —"

"I will not be made a soldier!" said Hermione furiously. The "again" was only added within the safety of her head.

"That is what you'll become if you choose to follow him, and you know it! I'm here to tell you that you can have more than that! Think of the glory, think of the fame —"

"I have no interest in glory or fame!"

"Then consider the knowledge!" exclaimed Avery, and Hermione was now certain that Snape was nearby, for *Muffliato* had surely been cast around them. "Dumbledore will not allow you to use *any* of what you've been teaching yourself right under his nose. You've read *Moste Potente Potions* so thoroughly that you have the recipes memorised. I don't believe for a *second* that that's the only book of its kind you've taken an interest in. He views that type of magic as Dark. He seeks to withhold it from us. I'm sure you've noticed how disappointing the contents of even the Restricted Section is. That is *his* doing."

"Voldemort —"

Avery practically hissed at her —

"— could offer me the entire world on a silver platter and I would still refuse to join him." Hermione drew her wand the same second that he did, and they both aimed at each other's throats. "Go on, Avery. I dare you."

"He is not the sort to accept being snubbed by blood traitors like you," Avery said, in a low, ominous voice. "If you decide to join Dumbledore and his merry band of idiots, then on your head it will be."

"If you're under the impression that I will be anyone's pawn," said Hermione fiercely, "you are severely mistaken. The *private meetings* I've had with the headmaster were about an apprenticeship with next year's Defence Against the Dark Arts professor. Any knowledge I wish to gain, I will gain myself, and no one — not Dumbledore and not Voldemort — can persuade me otherwise. Now, I suggest you leave me alone before you get hurt."

For a long moment, Avery was silent, his jaw firmed and his eyes flitting across her face. Finally, he lowered his wand and stood.

"You will regret this," he said, and it did not sound like a threat; it sounded like a promise.

Hermione kept her wand raised until he was out of sight, then slumped back in her seat, her heart racing. *If I were really a pure-blood,* she asked herself, trembling with a combination of anger and fear, *would this have happened in my own time too?*

She hated that she did not know the answer.

"Oh, there you are," said a relieved voice. She glanced up to see Pandora take the spot opposite her, setting down her bag. "We've been looking all over for you."

Remus sat down on the chair Avery had just abandoned, looking both wary and suspicious.

“The strangest thing happened,” he said. “I left the classroom only a minute after you, and when I got here, I couldn’t find you anywhere. I couldn’t even find our table.”

“It was as though it had disappeared entirely,” said Pandora, eyeing Hermione’s hands, in which she held both her wand and her quill. “You’re shaking.”

Remus attempted to remove both objects from her grasp, but Hermione refused to relinquish them. She felt like she was going to be sick.

“I received an offer,” she said, in a wavering voice. “An offer to —” She cut herself off, too angry to continue.

“Join him,” Remus finished on an exhale. He clenched his hands into fists on his lap, bunching the grey fabric of his trousers. “How could You-Know-Who possibly think that —?”

“Knowledge.”

“Ah,” said Pandora softly, with wide, sorrowful eyes. “Knowledge: a promise that only fools would fall for. Funny, that.”

“You have Muggle-born friends,” said Remus heatedly, appearing more furious than Hermione had ever seen him in this time. “You are friends with — with someone like —” He broke off, his nostrils flaring.

It was only this — what he left unsaid — that made Hermione loosen her grip, releasing both her wand and quill. She reached over and took both his hands in hers.

“I would *never* join him, Remus,” she swore, vehement. “*Never*.”

He closed his eyes briefly, breathing unevenly.

“I think I’ll go finish my Charms essay in the common room,” said Pandora abruptly, hoisting her bag onto her shoulder. Her pale eyes were glistening with unshed tears. She gave Hermione a smile that could only be described as grateful, and then left them alone.

Hermione twisted to face Remus properly, considering her words. She wanted to reassure him, but she also felt the need to warn him — as much as she could, anyway.

“Vol—” She stopped, recalling her earlier decision to avoid saying his name. “You-Know-Who is attracted to power. He surrounds himself with those whose power he believes will add to his own. I couldn’t care less about that, but it’ll surprise you how many people do. People you think you know. People you trust.”

“None of my —”

“No, listen to me. He is gaining more followers than you could possibly imagine. They are everywhere, and they are always watching. I’ll still be here next year when all of you are

gone; I'll be fine, but you're going to have to be even more careful than you are now because it is going to be *so much worse* on the outside. No one will be there to protect you."

"I can protect myself," said Remus. He fixed her with a hard look. "And I'd trust my friends with my life. I don't believe a single one of them would betray me. Not after all they've done to help me."

Hermione let out a sad sigh, her eyes watering.

"Just promise me that you'll be careful," she said. "Promise me that you'll do your very best to keep yourself safe."

The tension seemed to drain from Remus' body. He pulled his hands from her own to wrap his arms around her, drawing her closer. She rested her head against his chest, listening to the pounding of his heart.

"I don't want you to get hurt," she whispered.

"I'll be OK, Mione," he whispered back. "I promise."

Remus scarcely left her alone after that. Whenever he spotted Avery or Mulciber in the corridors, he would draw her as far away from them as possible. He would also ask her to stay in the common room when he had rounds or Lily and James were holding a Prefects' meeting. She wound up sitting with Sirius during these times, usually arguing about house-elf rights and biting her tongue to keep herself from bringing up the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare; he would likely lose his mind if he knew that she had won them not only weekly pay and sick days, but safe refuge, or if she told him that even the smallest signs of abuse led to full-fledged investigations.

It was four days after Avery had extended Voldemort's offer that Remus filled the others in on what had happened. Sirius had caught on to the sudden intensity of the glares he was sending in the direction of the Slytherin seventh-years and knew at once that something was wrong. The explanation left Lily, Marlene, and Frank all suitably repulsed, Mary looked horrified, James, Sirius, and Alice were outraged, and Peter looked at Hermione as though he were seeing her in an entirely new light.

"I got an offer, too," Sirius revealed in a low voice, his expression dark. James alone appeared to have already known this. "Before I ran away. I've no doubt in my mind that they've moved on to Regulus by now. The bloody fool is a fucking fanatic. He collects newspaper clippings to do with You-Know-Who and his followers. I know for a *fact* that he'll be stupid enough to join them."

"He's sixteen!" Alice said. "*You* were sixteen, Sirius!"

"You think that changes anything?" said Sirius nastily. "You-Know-Who doesn't care about any of that, and neither do my mother and father. I reckon they'll be even prouder of my brother than they already are — their perfect little heir bringing honour to the *Noble and Most Ancient House of Black*," he added, sneering unattractively.

It took two cigarettes and a whispered conversation with James to calm him down. For several days after, however, the sight of Regulus alone made him tense and quick to anger. James just about shoved a piece of chocolate down his throat on their way to visit Remus during their shared free period the day after the full moon, for they had just spotted Regulus in the company of Avery and Mulciber.

"Get it together, Padfoot," he said, walking with an arm around Sirius' shoulders. Hermione held one of the doors to the hospital wing open for them. "Getting angry won't do you or your brother any good."

Sirius made a disgruntled sound and took a pack of cigarettes out of his bag. He had one in his mouth and was about to light it when Hermione snatched it away.

"You cannot *smoke* in the hospital wing, Sirius!"

He rolled his eyes, taking out another cigarette. This time, James took it from him, along with the entire pack.

"She's right, mate. No smoking near the ill. Madam Pomfrey would have your head."

Sirius stomped away and dropped into one of the chairs beside Remus' bed with the dramatics of a spoiled child who had been denied dessert. Hermione and James shared a significant look before joining him, the latter on the opposite chair and Hermione at the foot of the bed.

"What's got you in a strop?" Remus asked Sirius, slowly sitting up. He grimaced in pain; Hermione and James both glared at him until he laid back down.

"Nothing," grumbled Sirius, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Right." Remus turned to James, who was placing what remained of Remus' chocolate bar on his bedside table. "What happened?"

"His brother —"

"Put a sock in it, Prongs."

James threw his hands up in defeat.

"We brought you Lily's Arithmancy notes," Hermione said, hastily changing the subject. She took a scroll of parchment out of her bag and placed it on Remus' blanketed lap. "She said to tell you to get better soon."

"Did she make any remarks on my shit immune system?"

"Not this time," said James. "Hasn't in a long time, actually. I reckon she's had it figured out for a couple of years now, mate."

Remus let out a long breath, squeezing his eyes shut.

“She’s too smart, Moony,” said Sirius, softening. “She was bound to find out eventually. It only took Mione a month.”

Hermione shrugged. “I studied magical creatures a lot growing up,” she said. “I was able to recognise the signs.”

“She’s not mentioned anything,” said James, “so it’s clear that she doesn’t care. It’s Lily; she’s just not like that.”

“Yeah, I know,” muttered Remus tiredly. “I just —”

“We get it, Moony. It’s all right.”

“Let’s just be grateful she hasn’t figured out the rest of us. Then we’d surely be getting an earful.”

“Perhaps not,” said Hermione thoughtfully. “I think she’d be rather proud of you, really.”

“Proud of us for breaking the law?” asked James incredulously.

“Proud of you for taking care of your friend,” she corrected. “I know I am.”

Remus sighed, lifting a hand to rub the side of his face, and opened his eyes again. He suddenly frowned.

“Where’s Peter?”

“Trying to steal the Map back from Filch,” said Sirius. “We set off a Dungbomb in the Entrance Hall to keep him occupied.”

“*Three* Dungbombs,” said Hermione disapprovingly. She shook her head. “Children, the lot of you.”

Remus gave a small grin, and she huffed. *Honestly.*

“Remus Lupin, I thought I told you to rest!” Madam Pomfrey reprimanded loudly, bustling towards them. Remus, who had just taken a bite of the chocolate bar, looked up at her innocently. “If you refuse to listen then I’ll have no choice but to give you a Sleeping Draught.”

“We only just got here, Poppy! Give the bloke a break.”

“Don’t make me kick you out, Mr Black.”

“We’ll let him rest, Madam Pomfrey,” said James, flashing her a charming grin. “No strenuous activities, I promise.”

Madam Pomfrey scoffed. “As if anyone could rest with the two of you around. Menaces, the both of you.”

Hermione nodded in agreement, highly amused.

“I’ll go back to sleep as soon as they leave, Madam Pomfrey,” said Remus, but Madam Pomfrey shook her head at him and returned to her office to fetch a Sleeping Draught. He made another attempt to sit up when she returned and was forced back down by four sets of hands. Clicking her tongue, Madam Pomfrey helped him to drink the potion, then warned Hermione, James, and Sirius to keep their voices down if they wished to stay before drawing the curtain shut around them and striding away.

That was when James and Sirius suddenly straightened up and turned to Hermione, their expressions borderline threatening.

“What are your intentions with Remus?” James asked, and, unprepared, she felt her face heat up. “He fancies you.”

“A lot,” said Sirius, with a nod.

“We’ve never seen him like this before.”

“You might just be his Evans.”

“It’s true.”

“Therefore, as his friends, we must ensure —”

“— that you’re not going to mess him about —”

“— because he’s already losing his mind over you.”

“We protect our own,” said James seriously. “So, I’ll ask you again, what are your intentions with Remus?”

Hermione opened and closed her mouth several times before giving up and simply staring at them. She did not have intentions — not really, anyway. All she wanted was to stay close to Remus while she still could; she wanted to soak up that little piece of home before it drifted out of reach, leaving her all alone.

“You don’t have an answer,” Sirius said, in disappointment. He turned to James. “She doesn’t have an answer.”

“That’s not exactly promising, Mione,” James said. “It’s an easy question. Do you fancy him or not?”

Hermione shifted slightly, growing increasingly uncomfortable. The chain felt heavy around her neck.

“If you don’t, you need to tell him now before he gets his hopes up because he’s already over the moon for you.”

“No pun intended.”

“Pun very much intended.”

“Padfoot, this is serious.”

“I’m always —”

“Don’t you dare —”

“— Sirius.”

“You dared.”

“I’m afraid I did.”

Normally, she would be amused by their clowning, but this conversation was causing her heartbeat to accelerate and the air around her to thicken. She held onto the edge of the bed to steady herself.

“Listen, Mione,” James said, sighing slightly, “Moony’s been through a lot. And I know you have, too, but if you’re not ser— *committed* to him then you need to let him know. Because right now you’re leading him on, and that’s a rubbish thing to do to a person who considers you their friend.”

Hermione’s eyes began to sting at the corners, and she hunched over, propping her elbows up on her knees and hiding her face in her hands. It had never been her intention to lead Remus on, but she could not help it; she needed him. The guilt she felt for doing this to him, paired with the guilt she felt for doing this to Ron, was seemingly insurmountable, and now she felt as though she were drowning in it, unable to obtain any oxygen.

Before Hermione knew it, she was sobbing.

She felt the mattress dip beside her, then a hand on her back, and heard James say softly, “Shit, Mione, I’m sorry. We don’t mean to upset you. We’re just trying to look out for Remus, yeah? It’s OK. Take a deep breath.”

“*I already had my Evans*!” Hermione said, nearly choking on the words. She tried to take a deep breath but wound up gasping fruitlessly. “Well, I — I had my *toerag*. He’s — he’s not *here*.”

“He’s dead, isn’t he?” said Sirius quietly, and she only sobbed in response. The sound of him getting to his feet was slightly muffled. “I’m going to get her a Calming Draught.”

“*I — I care about Remus*!” she gasped. “*I swear that I do*! *But I can’t — I c—can’t —*”

“Shh … all right, I understand …” James pulled her into his arms, rubbing her back, and she cried into his shoulder. If she closed her eyes, it could have been Harry embracing her; this thought brought her no comfort. “You don’t have to explain. Just breathe.”

Sirius seemed to return not a moment later, and James tilted her head back to help her down the Calming Draught. Nearly a minute passed before her breathing slowed and her heart rate

returned to normal. She slumped against his side, woefully drained. Silent tears slid down her cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” Sirius said, looking uncharacteristically awkward. “We didn’t know.”

“You’ve told Remus about him, haven’t you?” James asked, and Hermione nodded. “Then that’s all we can ask for — that you’re honest with him.” He began rubbing her back again, in small, soothing, circular motions. “I — fuck, I can’t even imagine … I’m sorry this happened to you, Mione. I’m really fucking sorry.”

That night, Hermione spent two hours practising Occlumency before bed. She normally only practised for an hour; she would bid the other seventh-year girls goodnight, draw the curtains shut around her bed, and retreat into her head. With her distance from Ron fresh in her mind, however, it took much longer for her to adjust her memories of him into ones that would not raise any questions.

But no matter how long she spent burying the truth of her existence in this time, and no matter how successful she was in doing so, the ache in her chest that reminded her of what she was missing never left.

Chapter End Notes

While writing Avery's offer, I tried my best to make it as reasonable as possible. I don't want everyone who joins Voldemort to sound like raving lunatics. That wasn't the case; most of them were smart, powerful people who truly believed that joining him was in their best interest.

Farewell Friends

Chapter Summary

> Well, you do enough talk
> My little hawk, why do you cry?
> Tell me, what did you learn from the Tillamook burn?
> Or the Fourth of July?
> We're all gonna die
> — Fourth of July, Surfjan Stevens

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Watching Lily study herself half to death in preparation for the N.E.W.T.s made Hermione realise just how insane she had behaved herself when she had sat them the first time. It had reached such a worrisome degree that it had become necessary on more than one occasion for Ginny to drag her from the library and insist in a way reminiscent of her mother that Hermione eat some food. She had also received multiple letters of concern from both Ron and Harry and had even been subjected to a speech about the consequences of draining oneself from Luna.

After months of avoidance, Lily had at last returned to her seat in the library, leaving Pandora — who was studying for her O.W.L.s — to claim the chair at the head of the table. James regularly snuck food in for Lily and, most nights, had to be the one to force her to go to bed, otherwise she would stay up until sunrise, hunched over a textbook.

Remus was not much better. He had taken to reading his notes as he walked to class and James, ever the caregiver, would grab hold of his elbow and steer him in the right direction before he bumped into anything, or anyone. On one particularly exhausting Monday, James was not quick enough to save Remus from Peeves the poltergeist, who gleefully dumped a bucket of soapy water on his head, drenching both him and his notes.

Hermione understood why achieving high marks on their examinations was so important to Lily and Remus — perhaps even more important than it was to their friends. Lily was fighting to be accepted in the wizarding world, and that inherent need to prove herself had only worsened with the death of her parents; there was almost nothing holding her to the Muggle world now, and as a result, she had no choice but to build a life for herself in this one. Similarly, Remus knew that there was just about nothing he could do to be fully accepted because of his lycanthropy, and his chances of finding a job would only be worse if he earned anything less than Outstandings.

It made Hermione sick to her stomach to watch how desperately he pored over his notes; he would be sent to parlay with the werewolves regardless, trapped in the life he had done his very best to avoid. It also made her want to shout at Professor Dumbledore for even considering asking it of him.

But all of this had already happened, and she knew that there was nothing she could do to change it.

Only after leading the Gryffindor Quidditch team to victory in the Quidditch Finals at the end of the month (despite Regulus having caught the Snitch) did James begin studying. Marlene, who was similarly a Chaser on the team, did the same. It was a baffling sight to behold, James and Sirius studying, for they did so effortlessly, lazing about and idly flipping through their notes, completely confident in their abilities. They often appeared as though they were merely rereading a book that they already knew by heart.

As the Gryffindor seventh-years continued to prepare themselves for the futures that awaited them upon graduating, Hermione prepared herself for the state of loneliness she would be left in once they were gone. She was, in truth, terrified to be on her own. How often would she be able to see Remus and Lily, if at all? Or even the others? She knew that she would still have Pandora, but it was not the same.

Sometimes Hermione thought it would be for the best if she did not see any of them anymore; she had gotten far too attached, and despite knowing that nothing she did would alter the timeline, this fact bothered her, becoming a source of anxiety whenever she allowed herself to dwell on it.

On the first of May, Madam Pince showed her to the rooms in which she would be staying in the years to come. They were located on the first floor, two corridors away from the library, and included a barren bedroom, a bathroom, and a sparse living space with two armchairs, a desk, an empty bookcase, and a small fireplace. She helped Hermione to decide on a password with the portrait of an English poet from the fifteenth century which hid the entrance, informed her that she would be expected in the library at ten o'clock sharp on the morning of the twenty-ninth of June for training, and left her to further explore her new living quarters.

There was a strange sense of finality in looking around at the bland, unimpressive space. Hermione concluded that living alone at Hogwarts next year would likely prove to be twice as depressing as she had originally predicted. This may have been what she had wanted upon her arrival in the seventies — isolation — but it did not seem nearly as appealing anymore. Perhaps this made her weak, but she was allowed to be, was she not? She did not always know.

She sank into one of the armchairs before the hearth, gripping the arms tightly. This was for the best, she decided; she had had her fun, but it was time to leave those whom she had befriended to the lives they were destined to live, no matter how short those lives may be. Her memories told her that Remus and Sirius had not remembered her when they saw her again, and nor had Snape or any of the other professors or Death Eaters; clearly, this meant that she had only been with them for a small period. And that period, she knew, must soon expire if all was to go as it had.

And so, Hermione would remain at Hogwarts, following Professor Dumbledore's instructions, and she would not complain. She would wait until November of 1981 before entering the Department of Mysteries and informing them of her situation so that they could use their own failsafe to send her back to 2020. She would then carry on with her life, as though it had not gone interrupted.

Graduation would have to be farewell. The decision left her with a heavy heart, but she knew it was the right one. It was what she must have done the first time around, and if she had done it then, she could certainly do it now.

Hermione lifted a hand to wipe away the tear sliding down her cheek. Reluctantly, she stood. *I'm doing the right thing,* she thought firmly, nodding to herself. She steeled her spine and approached the portrait hole.

The surprise of seeing Professor Dumbledore standing in the corridor outside, discussing the many philosophies of Socrates with the English poet, had her freezing mid-step.

"Miss Greenwood," he said, with a smile that was not altogether happy. "I was hoping I might have a few moments of your time. May I come in?"

"Yes, of course," Hermione said, unable to hide her apprehension. She stepped back to allow him inside, letting the portrait swing shut behind him. She watched him take a brief, sweeping look around the room before turning to face her. "Is everything all right, sir?"

"That, my dear, is a question I often find myself struggling to answer," Professor Dumbledore said heavily. He gestured to one of the armchairs in question, seating himself with a sigh when she nodded. "Forgive me for being so forward, but are you, as I have suspected, aware of the existence of the Order of the Phoenix?"

Again, Hermione nodded her head, moving to sit beside him.

"Recruitment is rather more difficult than I wish," he confided. "I know that we shall prevail, and that Lord Voldemort shall eventually be defeated, but it concerns me what events may take place in the time leading up to this inevitability."

"You know that I cannot tell you —" Hermione began, her apprehension growing, but Professor Dumbledore waved his hand, inclining his head, and she fell silent.

"I am not requesting that you do, and I never shall. I have come to see you today because, candidly, the simple act of *knowing* weighs heavily on me, and I reasoned that it might have similar effects on yourself. You see, for many years now, I have been recruiting like-minded witches and wizards, and I worry that I am unfit to lead them, though I continue to do so, nonetheless. The last time I attempted to play such a role …" Professor Dumbledore trailed off, his brows furrowed slightly.

"The power of knowledge can be profoundly lonely at times," he continued after a minute, turning his head to look at Hermione with a sad smile. "I only wished to commiserate with someone who shares in my loneliness for a moment. I apologise."

Taken aback that he would choose her to come to for comfort, or anyone for that matter, it took Hermione several seconds to respond.

“No apology is necessary, sir,” she said finally. “To be perfectly honest, similar thoughts had been going through my head when you arrived.”

“I have plans to recruit some of your friends for the Order,” Professor Dumbledore admitted, his brows furrowed again. He paused to study her for a moment. “I’m afraid I do not know how often you will see them in the years to come, as you cannot leave the castle without the appropriate supervision.”

He left the “again” unsaid; Hermione lowered her gaze, guilty.

“Maintaining correspondence, I should think, would be helpful in your endeavour to continue blending in,” he went on, “but any more than that could lead to unforeseen consequences. I regret that I must tell you it is, perhaps, for the best that you allow yourself to drift away from them as naturally as can be managed.”

“I know,” said Hermione, resting her head against the back of her chair with a tired sigh. “I’ve reached the same conclusion myself.”

Silence filled the room, heavy and resigned. The space seemed to have become oddly larger, as if it had been emptied further in the absence of speech.

“The year twenty-twenty is a long time away,” Professor Dumbledore said after a while, his tone abnormally tentative. “Although you have confirmed this war will, in one way or another, come to an end in a few years’ time, I know by both the scars you bear and your apparent experience in defending yourself against the Dark Arts that it will not truly be over, not yet.

“I wish to ask you two questions, and two alone. I promise not to cause any interference regardless of your answers, and you may, of course, refuse to answer at all.” He inhaled slowly, as though steeling himself. “Am I alive in your time?”

Hermione closed her eyes.

“No,” she murmured.

“I suspected not,” said Professor Dumbledore, sounding incredibly unconcerned about this. “My brother, Aberforth —”

“Aberforth is still alive.”

Although he did not make a sound, she could sense his relief.

“I haven’t seen him myself in years, but a friend of mine —” *Harry*, she thought, but did not say, “— makes it a point to visit him every few months.”

“In that case, I ask that you deliver a message to him upon your return. It is, admittedly, quite cowardly of me to wait until I am no longer around to tell him what I should have whilst I

was, but alas … I am not as infallible a human as I often pretend to be."

No one is.

"Tell Aberforth, the fault lies with me, and always has. Tell him that not a day goes by that I do not regret the past … and that I am sorry my choices led to what they did. I never meant them to."

"I think *she* knows that," said Hermione softly, opening her eyes. "Or at least her portrait does … but I'll tell him. I promise."

If Professor Dumbledore was surprised that she knew about his sister, Ariana, he did not make it known; he rose slowly to his feet and gave her a thankful look, then strode towards the portrait hole, held it open for her, and said, "Thank you for your time, Miss Greenwood. I cannot sufficiently express my gratitude."

"There's no need, Professor," said Hermione kindly, stepping out into the corridor. "I understand."

Professor Dumbledore followed her out, offered her a small smile, and turned down the corridor, nothing more to say. Never had she imagined him to be lonely; he had been too well loved for that. Now, however, as she watched him walk away with his hands clasped behind his back, so unbearably small in the spacious corridor, he seemed no more than an old man who had lived long enough to drink his tea alone at an empty table.

Suddenly very tired, she began her slow march back to Gryffindor Tower. Lost to her thoughts, she did not spot the ripple of a Disillusionment Charm against the stone wall on her right.

Over the following weeks, Hermione made a point to spend as much time with everyone as possible. In their company, she pretended that her smiles did not bear a tinge of sadness and that listening to their plans for their futures did not leave her feeling empty inside. She managed to hide it all well enough that no one seemed to notice, with the sole exception of Pandora, who was tactful enough to not say anything until they were alone.

"There's something weighing on you," she said as they sat in the library, two weeks after Hermione's conversation with Professor Dumbledore. "I can see it — almost like a fog that's settled round your head and shoulders."

At this description, Hermione could not help but think of Luna. "You remind me a lot of someone I know."

"Really?" Pandora said, taken aback. "No one's ever said that to me before. Will you tell me about them?"

Hermione hesitated, but in the end, she decided that Pandora could be trusted with knowledge that others could not.

“She’s completely and utterly selfless,” she said, taking the time to choose her words carefully, and so do Luna justice, “and probably the kindest person I’ve ever known. She got picked on a lot when she was younger because she sees things differently than most people, myself included. She was considered … *loony* … although she did wear radish earrings and frequently talk about nargles, whatever those are, so I cannot honestly dispute that claim.”

Pandora smiled, her eyes bright with amusement. She twirled one of her sunflower earrings between her fingers and let out a tinkling laugh.

“She sounds like the sort of person I would get on with.”

“I’ve no doubt that she is,” said Hermione.

“Is that what’s been troubling you?” asked Pandora gently. “The absence of those you love?”

Hermione let out a long sigh.

“Their absence will always trouble me. However, there is nothing that can be done about it, so I suppose I’ve just got to soldier on, as they say.”

Pandora wrinkled her nose.

“I’ve never liked that phrase.”

Before Hermione inquire as to why, Remus and Mary arrived; she fell silent and returned to her Transfiguration notes. Several minutes passed before her reading was interrupted by the sound of Remus’ laughter. She turned to him sharply.

“What exactly is so funny?”

“I’m sorry,” Remus said, trying and failing to smother his grin, “it’s just — you’re very amusing to watch study.”

“And why is that?” asked Hermione coolly.

“You get this haughty look about you — like you think the work is below you,” Remus said, sounding fond, and Mary nodded with a sheepish giggle. “Whenever someone interrupts you, you do this thing where you turn your head the slightest bit and just glare at them until they get so uncomfortable that they’ve got to look away. You also sort of guard your work; you hunch over it like you’re trying to shield it from prying eyes.”

Hermione, realising she was, in fact, hunched over her notes, hastily straightened up, shooting him a cross look.

“Yes!” said Remus. He pointed at her face, laughing again. “That’s the one — right there!”

She glared at him for a minute longer, but it had no effect. With an indignant huff, she turned back to her notes, ignoring him. She had to remind herself every few minutes to sit up again, much to her annoyance.

*

Both the written and practical portions of the Charms exam were dreadfully boring. At least, for Hermione, who completed the former with half an hour left to spare and sat there not knowing what to do with herself while she waited for everyone else to finish. Transfiguration, Ancient Runes, Herbology, and Defence Against the Dark Arts went much the same. Arithmancy and Potions were more time-consuming due to the careful calculations involved, but even so, they remained almost astoundingly easy.

As the seventh-years exited the Great Hall after their final exam, Lily fretted over the answers she had given while Mary simultaneously reassured her and panicked about her own; Alice and Frank were speaking in excited undertones with Amelia Bones and their other Hufflepuff friend; Remus was swinging his arms as he walked, smiling calmly; and James, Sirius, and Marlene were whooping and bumping shoulders, leading the way out of the big, oak front doors and onto the sunny grounds.

It seemed that, just like they had in Hermione's time, everyone felt that lounging in the sunshine with their friends was the best way to begin celebrating the completion of their N.E.W.T.s; the grassy land surrounding the Black Lake was full of smiling and laughing students, several of whom were taking out flasks or shoving each other into the water. Hermione could not resist laughing along as two Ravenclaws carried a shrieking Xenophilius Lovegood into the lake.

She and the other Gryffindor seventh-years, along with the two Hufflepuffs, plopped down under the shade of the beech tree a few yards from the edge of the water. Almost at once, James had a Snitch out and was releasing it only to catch it immediately after; Lily took to smacking it out of his reach, laughing at his indignant squawks. Beside them, Peter was bemoaning the loss of the Marauder's Map, for none of his attempts to steal it back from Filch had been successful, and on their other side, Mary had taken her shoes off and was giggling at the way the grass tickled her toes. Marlene was trying her very best to tan her face and batting Sirius away whenever he began kissing her neck and jaw, complaining that he was blocking the sunrays. Alice laid with her head on Frank's stomach and Amelia's head on her own while their friend, whose blond hair was shining in the warm June glow, picked blades of grass and threw them in Frank's face.

Hermione sat next to Remus, their backs against the trunk of the tree, and listened to them all share their plans.

James had not a clue what sort of career he wished to have, and he had the money to not have a clue. All he wanted was to build a life with Lily, who would be moving in with him that very week. "Just until I find a place of my own," she said, but not even she sounded as though she believed that. She would be searching for a Charms Master to apprentice under so that she could further her learning in the subject and had even been given a list of names from Professor Flitwick.

But none of this would happen, because she and James would both die in their home on Hallowe'en night three years from now.

Peter was considering finding work in Diagon Alley. Apparently, he was interested in being a part of the group that managed it.

But he would instead go into hiding, considered a traitor to both sides of the war, and be killed by his own hand in the cellar of Malfoy Manor in 1998.

Sirius wanted to create more flying motorbikes, or perhaps become a Hitwizard, or possibly purchase a pub. He did not much care, so long as he was happy and disappointing his parents.

But he would instead be wrongfully imprisoned in Azkaban and murdered by his own cousin three years after his escape.

Marlene dreamed of playing for the Holyhead Harpies, the all-witch Quidditch team, but claimed that she would settle for whatever team was willing to sign her.

But she and the rest of her family would be murdered before she ever got the chance.

Frank and Alice would be joining the Auror training program, pending their N.E.W.T. results, and getting married as soon as possible so they could move in together without Frank's mother throwing a fit about premarital relations.

This would indeed happen, but, following 1981, they would spend the rest of their lives in St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, unable to recognise their own son.

Amelia, too, had a job lined up in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, as the secretary of Bartemius Crouch Sr.

She would rise to the Head of the Department herself by the nineties, but be murdered in her own home in 1996, leaving her niece, Susan, and Susan's parents and grandparents the only remaining members of the Bones family.

The other Hufflepuff, who turned out to be Sturgis Podmore, a member of the Order of the Phoenix in both wars, had an intern position saved for him in the Department of International Magical Cooperation.

He would spend two years in Azkaban for breaking into the Department of Mysteries whilst under the Imperius Curse, but would survive to attend the Potters' annual New Year's Eve party with his partner, Ralph.

Remus would find work where he could, when he could, and hope that would be enough. He would be alone for a long time, struggling, and finally start a family of his own in 1997 with his wife, Nymphadora Tonks.

But they would both be killed less than a year later, Remus by Antonin Dolohov and Tonks by Bellatrix Lestrange, leaving their son, Teddy, to be raised by Tonks' mother.

Mary, like Peter, hoped to find work in Diagon Alley. Hermione did not know if she would, for she had no knowledge of her in the future. Her face was one she had vaguely recognised when they first met, but she still could not pinpoint why that was. She hoped it meant that

Mary would live to see the end of this war, and that she would manage to escape the Muggle-born Registration Commission in the next one —

Hermione sat forward with a gasp.

Mary and Reginald Cattermole! Mary was the Muggle-born we saved when we broke into the Ministry of Magic!

"All right, Mione?" Remus asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Yes," said Hermione at once, a laugh bubbling up in her throat. She beamed at him. "Yes, I am." She laughed softly, shaking her head, and leaned back against the tree, her mouth hanging partly open in amazement.

Ron had looked up the Cattermoles after the war; he had never been able to stop wondering what had happened to them. It was then that they had discovered the Cattermoles had successfully hidden themselves and their three children and had happily moved back to England following Voldemort's defeat.

Mary will be fine, Hermione thought, biting her lip to keep from smiling too broadly. *Mary will be alive and happy, and I will get to see her again.*

She imagined visiting Mary and her family when she returned to 2020, and how shocked Mary would be to see her — to discover whom she really was. Hermione would never be able to tell any of the others what had truly happened to her, but she took solace in the fact that, one day, she would be able to tell Mary.

So, as it turned out, Hermione would not be leaving them all behind, after all. *I'll still have one of them,* she thought once again a week later, as Professor McGonagall called Mary up on the stage to receive her diploma.

The graduation ceremony took place on a day both bright and abnormally warm for Scotland, and there was not a frown in sight. The seventh-years and their respective families filled the rows upon rows of chairs facing the stage which had been put up in front of the lake, watching as, one by one, students were called alphabetically to receive their diploma and shake the hands of the professors that had taught them everything they knew.

Hermione sat between a Ravenclaw named Fawley and a Slytherin named Haversmith, her own diploma already in hand and a bittersweet smile on her face.

When it came time for her turn to walk across the stage, Marlene blew a kiss at the crowd, and Sirius pretended to swoon, inciting laughter from those seated nearest to him. Mulciber, whose name was the next to be called, grimaced with disdain.

Once the seventh-years had all retaken their seats, the Head Girl and Boy were summoned to the stage a second time to give a speech. Lily unravelled a scroll of parchment on the surface of the mahogany podium and carefully smoothed it out, clearing her throat. Beside her, James flashed everyone a charming grin and, as though he genuinely could not help it, roughed his hair up even worse.

“Seven years is a long time,” Lily began strongly after a moment, her voice magnified by a Sonorous Charm. “Almost half of our lives have been spent here. This is the place where we all grew up. Year after year, we returned to the same classrooms, the same corridors, and the same people. Hogwarts has been more than just a school for us; it’s been a home.”

“Magic is far from the only thing we’ve learnt here,” James continued confidently. “We’ve learnt how to be independent, how to judge right from wrong, how to build lasting friendships, how to avoid Peeves — and McGonagall after Gryffindor loses at Quidditch —” there were many laughs from the crowd, and Professor McGonagall shook her head fondly, “— and so much more. We’ve learnt how to be the sort of people that we can be proud of — the sort of people who are willing to stand up for what they believe in.”

The crowd grew solemn at that, a hush falling over them.

“Hogwarts has protected us,” said Lily, “and it has taught us how to defend ourselves for when it will inevitably no longer able to. It has raised us as best it could, so that when we leave here today, we are prepared to face a world in which we will have only ourselves and our loved ones to rely on in order to survive. It won’t be easy — nothing worth doing is — but together, we can do it.” She inhaled a shaky breath and James took her hand in his own. “We will fight so that — one day — a new generation will have the opportunity to experience the wonders that Hogwarts has to offer, just as we have, no matter who they are or who they were born to.”

Behind Hermione, Mulciber gave a snort that quickly turned to a grunt. Faintly, she heard Marlene hiss at him.

James carried on, his jaw firm and his face grim.

“This speech is typically meant to inspire — to lend you all the strength you need to set out on your own for the first time in your lives … but I must admit that there’s a lot of you who I have no interest in lending strength to. We may have grown up together, we may have sat beside each other in lessons and played on the same pitch, but that won’t matter once we leave here.” His gaze drifted from row to row, hard and defiant. “After today, we will be fighting against each other. If you have a mask on and I don’t, it won’t matter that we once shared potions’ ingredients or that I passed you a spare quill that one time when you had none. We will have both made our choices, we will have both decided to stand up for what we believe in, and even if it is Hogwarts that taught us both how to do that, *we* are the ones who will ultimately decide what those choices and beliefs are.”

Lily lifted their joined hands to press a kiss to his knuckles. It was not a display of affection, but a sign of solidarity.

“We would like to thank our professors for preparing us to the best of their abilities,” she said, turning her head slightly to look at them. “You should know how grateful we are for your guidance and support over these last seven years. Trust me when I say that we will never forget it.”

Professor Slughorn — to Hermione’s shock — took out an emerald handkerchief and dabbed at his eyes. Professor Sprout was openly weeping, her arm linked with Professor Sinistra’s.

“There is only so long that we can delay the inevitable,” Lily said, turning back to the crowd. “I wish very much that things were different, but, unfortunately, these are the times we live in. All I ask is that when we meet again, you will remember that Hogwarts was a home to *all* of us, not only you and yours.”

The applause began stiltedly, quietly, then eventually rose until half of the crowd was on their feet, clapping their hands. The sound alone was powerful, leaving goosebumps all down Hermione’s arms.

Alas, these words would mean nothing, in the end.

“Thank you, really!” James shouted, grinning once more. He raised a hand, signalling for everyone to settle back down. “Thank you all, but we’ve not quite finished yet!”

Lily narrowed her eyes at him.

“Whatever you’re planning to do, James Potter,” she said, in a warning voice, “don’t.”

“Oh, Lily,” said James, with a sigh of mock wistfulness, “I sincerely hope you can find it within yourself to still love me after this.” He turned sharply, cupping his mouth with his hands as though the Sonorous Charm was somehow lacking. “NOW, PADFOOT!”

Not a moment later, there was an earth-shattering *BOOM*, and fireworks shot off from all around them, showering the audience with sparks of red, blue, yellow, and green, yet leaving them miraculously unharmed; at the same time, the Giant Squid shot out of the lake and dove back in with an epic splash, creating a wave about ten metres tall that washed right over the stage and soaked the professors, James, Lily, and the entirety of the first three rows.

Yelps and cries of shock sounded throughout the crowd, yet Professor McGonagall’s voice stood out above them all.

“*POTTER*!”

Hermione, dripping from head to toe with water, clung to an only partly-drenched Mary, both of them laughing and crying as they watched the fireworks that cracked and flashed above their heads. A dozen people threw their hats high up into the air, cheering, while those of others needed to be wrung out before they could make it more than a few feet without falling straight back down. Most of the parents were grumbling irritably and casting Hot Air Charms to dry themselves, although there was one couple — who looked much too old to still have a child at Hogwarts, frankly, even if they were graduating — hurried up to the stage with beaming faces. In no time at all, the witch had taken James’ face in her hands and proceeded to shower him with kisses while her husband laughed uproariously and clapped him on the back.

Mr and Mrs Potter.

“Say, Mary,” Hermione said quickly, “has Lily met James’ parents yet?” When Mary shook her head, she began leading her up to the stage, adding, “Let’s provide her with some moral support, shall we?”

As it happened, Lily shot them a panicked look the moment they reached her. She was standing just behind the Potters, frantically wringing out her hair.

“They’ll love you,” Hermione whispered to her. “You’ve nothing to worry about.”

“Besides, even if they don’t, have you ever known them to deny their son anything?” said Mary, raising an eyebrow.

Lily let out a loud laugh seemingly against her will, just as Mrs Potter released James to turn her attention on her instead.

“And you, my dear, must be the lovely Miss Lily Evans,” Mrs Potter said, and she clasped her hands together excitedly, smiling back at James over her shoulder. “Oh, James, love, she’s just as beautiful as you described!”

Lily turned pink.

“I’m Euphemia Potter,” said Mrs Potter, looking at her again. She yanked her husband over by the elbow. “And this is Fleamont. We are pleased beyond words to welcome you into our little family, my — my goodness, your eyes!” she added abruptly, gasping in delighted surprise, “they really *are* as green as emeralds!”

“Er — yes?” said Lily, blinking bemusedly. “Pardon me, sorry, I meant — what I meant to say is, thank you. It’s a pleasure to meet you, too, Mr and Mrs Potter.”

“No, no! Euphemia and Fleamont, my dear!” Mrs Potter huffed and elbowed Mr Potter — who had gotten distracted by the fireworks — in the ribs. “*Fleamont*!”

“Oh — yes, very nice to meet you, Lily,” said Mr Potter. Grinning, he extended a hand for Lily to shake. “Welcome to the family.”

“*Welcome to the family*,” Mary mouthed at Hermione, her eyes widening in awe. “*Oh, my God.*”

James wrapped an arm round Lily’s waist, his grin so broad that his cheeks touched the rim of his glasses.

“Effie!” exclaimed Sirius, suddenly appearing from seemingly out of nowhere and speeding into Mrs Potter’s waiting arms. “Did you enjoy my fireworks?”

“They were marvellous, my sweet boy,” said Mrs Potter kindly, kissing him on the side of the head. “We are so very proud of you.”

“Oh, Mum, Dad, this is Mary and Mione,” James said, nodding to Hermione and Mary, who were still standing at Lily’s side. “I must’ve told you about them both at some point.”

“Yes, I believe you have,” said Mr Potter, stepping forth to shake their hands. “It’s always nice to put faces to the names.”

Hermione nodded eagerly, raking in every detail of him and Mrs Potter. Their equally grey hair sat tidily upon both of their heads; they had deep laugh lines and infectious smiles; and Mr Potter's eyes were, like his son's, hazel and required spectacles, judging by the gold pair that was poking out the pocket in which he stored a scarlet handkerchief, while Mrs Potter's were a uniquely warm-looking blue.

"Mione," Sirius called, and Hermione glanced at him distractedly. He pointed to a spot some ten yards away, where Remus stood with whom she assumed must be his parents. "Moony wants you to meet Mr and Mrs Lupin."

"Did he actually say that?" asked Hermione.

"Yeah, but he's too much of a plonker to come over here and tell you himself."

Hermione gave Mr and Mrs Potter one last smile. "It was lovely meeting you, Mr and Mrs Potter," she said, and she left to approach the Lupins, thinking it would be nice to tell Teddy about his grandparents, too.

Mrs Lupin was a petite woman with a kind face, bright eyes, and rosy cheeks, who wore a glowing purple amulet, the same one Hermione's parents had both worn in order to pass through the wards at Hogwarts to attend her own graduation ceremony. She had one hand holding Remus' and kept patting it affectionately with her other. Mr Lupin, on the other hand, seemed to be purposely maintaining two feet between him and his son. He had light brown hair flecked with grey and lines on his forehead from a lifetime spent frowning.

"Mione!" said Remus brightly. "These are my parents, Hope and Lyall."

"It's wonderful to meet you, Mr and Mrs Lupin," said Hermione, shaking each of their hands in turn. "Remus has told me all about you."

"Well, now, I've heard plenty about you, too, Mione," Mrs Lupin said cheekily. She pointedly ignored Remus' splutter of outrage and pulled her into a hug. "I'm a good deal glad to be making your acquaintance."

"We hear you'll be spending the summer assisting Irma Pince in the library," said Mr Lupin, "is that right?"

"Yes, sir, I will be," said Hermione. "Just until September, at which point I'll be apprenticing under the new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor."

"Mm. Well, I should warn you that Irma is just as unpleasant to those who aren't her students as she is to those who are. I was unfortunate enough to attend school with her."

"Lyall, that was very rude!" admonished Mrs Lupin.

"That's *honesty*, Hope," Mr Lupin told her, and she and Remus shook their heads in exasperation, Mrs Lupin's much fonder than the latter's.

Just then, Professor Dumbledore, water still dripping from the end of his beard, called for the seventh-years to join him at the edge of the lake. Students hurriedly hugged their parents

good-bye and made their way over. The professors were already gathered there, and Hagrid stood a little away with the herd of thestrals that resided in the Forbidden Forest.

Hermione, the only seventh-year who would not be taking the boats to Hogsmeade Station, hastened to say a few farewells of her own. She embraced Marlene, then both Alice and Frank; she kissed Mary on the cheek and promised her that they would see each other again; she hugged Sirius so tightly that he raised his eyebrows at her, bewildered, and then slipped right past Peter to hug James equally tight; she held Lily in her arms for so long that Professor McGonagall told them to hurry up; and then she moved on to Remus.

"I'm going to miss you," Hermione murmured, in a watery voice, resting her forehead on his chest as they embraced. She had been in tears since hugging Sirius; Remus' robes were likely to have another wet spot when she backed away. "*So much*, Remus."

"This isn't good-bye forever," Remus told her, sounding nonplussed, and she squeezed her eyes shut, tightening her grip on him. He chuckled softly. "I'll miss you, too, Mione."

"Mr Lupin! Miss Greenwood!" snapped Professor McGonagall.

"All right, all right. Sorry, Professor," said Remus, letting go of Hermione. He leaned down to give her a kiss on the cheek, smiling. "See you, Mione." And he hurried off to join the other seventh-years clambering into the boats.

"Cheer up, Miss Greenwood," Professor Sprout said, wrapping a comforting arm around Hermione's shoulders. "Mr Lupin is right; this isn't good-bye forever."

Hermione leaned into her, pressing a hand to her mouth to keep a sob from escaping. Together, they watched the thestrals take flight, their skeletal wings stretched wide to cut through the wind.

And then the boats began to move, and off went the Hogwarts graduating class of 1978, laughing and cheering, unaware of the fates that awaited them.

The parents continued to converse with one another, as well as the professors, long after their children had faded from sight, but Hermione could not bear to remain there a second more. She left them all to walk back up to the castle, one hand still pressed to her mouth and the other holding herself tightly about the ribs, as though that would somehow keep everything inside of her from spilling out, at least until she reached her new quarters, for only there would it be safe to let go.

She hastened through the Entrance Hall and up the marble staircase to the first floor. The corridors were empty, classes done for the term and any non-graduating students cornered away elsewhere, some still studying for the last of their final examinations due to be sat the following morning. Her footsteps echoed on the stone as she walked, her vision a watery blur.

Just as Hermione was rounding the last corner, the portrait of the English poet finally within sight, a jet of red light shot out of thin air, so sudden and unexpected that she had no time to draw her wand or duck out of the way before it hit her square in the chest —

She fell backwards with a startled cry, unconscious before she hit the floor.

Chapter End Notes

Like I've said before, this will not be your typical Marauders' time-travel fic. This is where this story stops being an entirely pleasant one. There will still be humour and plenty of bright spots, but from here on out, it will be darker and the majority of the Marauders and co. will no longer be prominent characters. The main plot will be revealed and more chapters will contain content warnings at the start. If this is where you stop reading, I understand.

Lady Nott

Chapter Summary

> When my heart just burst like a glass balloon
> I let it fly too high and it shattered too soon
> I was the wrong damn girl in the wrong damn room
> — Hermit the Frog, MARINA

Chapter Notes

> CW: implied rape/non-con.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first thing Hermione became aware of when she came to was that she was lying on something very soft. She blinked blearily as she propped herself up on her elbows, her vision slowly clearing; she was stretched out on a plush, cream-coloured sofa in a grand parlour with Persian rugs and high walls covered in tapestries of divine detail. She was still wearing her black graduation robes, which had since dried. A glimpse through the tall paned windows on the right side of the room told her that night had fallen.

“Good evening, Miss Greenwood,” said a smooth, deep voice.

She snapped her head round, jolting upright and already reaching for her wand. On the high-backed armchair to her left sat a middle-aged man with dull, pitch-black hair, milk-white skin, and sharp features. He wore fine black robes and held his yew wand in a relaxed grip as he clicked his tongue at her.

“I’m afraid Mulciber already made sure to remove your wand from its clever little hiding spot,” he said, and he smirked slightly as he met her gaze.

Hermione’s blood ran cold; his eyes were red.

“I doubt there’s any need for me to introduce myself,” Lord Voldemort said, tilting his head as he studied her closely, “as you seem to already know who I am. Let us then move on to what you do not know — that is, the reason you are here.”

Hermione’s eyes darted about the room, searching for a way out —

“Do not delude yourself into believing you have any chance of escaping, Miss Greenwood. I can assure you, you don’t.”

Swallowing thickly, she met his gaze again. Learning Occlumency, it turned out, had been a very good idea; she could feel a slight pressure against her skull as he attempted to peer into her mind, and she thought only of articles about the work that had been done by him and his followers. The pressure was gone a second later.

“I’ll admit that I was surprised,” Voldemort continued casually, as though nothing had happened, “to learn of a student who had managed to take out three of my newest recruits with little to no effort. And then to learn that the same student had withstood the Imperius Curse? And that it had been cast on her by someone whom I previously believed to have a special talent for it? Well, I simply had to know more.”

Hermione felt herself deflate against the sofa cushions, her mouth hanging partly open, a cold dread filling her chest; she had done this to herself. If only, she thought, she had let herself fade into the background, inconsequential, this would not have happened. Yet, regardless of the call for caution, she had caved to that deep, driving desire to prove herself, even though there had been nothing to prove; she had gone and made herself interesting.

What a fool she had been.

“Did you know that you achieved the highest marks out of anyone in your year? I am told that you very nearly managed to set a new school record, your marks second only to my own. That is quite an accomplishment, especially for someone who received outside schooling. I’m sure you can understand why I was disappointed when my sources informed me of your private meetings with the headmaster. I have no doubt that he wished to induct you into his little group.”

Hermione blinked, hard; a few tears still escaped.

“The Order of the Phoenix,” said Voldemort, sounding faintly amused. “Even in death, they shall rise again … I suppose I can appreciate the sentiment.” He tapped the arm of his chair with his wand: a seemingly idle movement likely meant to remind her that this conversation could be made far less pleasant. “Nevertheless, I had hoped that you might join me instead. You carry many of the traits that I look for in my followers, and I made the assumption that the allure of knowledge would be enough to override any moral code you may pretend to live by. Alas, rare as it is, I was wrong.”

“My decision still stands,” said Hermione, speaking at last, defenceless yet unmoved. “I will not join you.”

Voldemort’s lips twitched, his eyes glinting in the light of the gas lamp on the spindly table next to him.

“And I no longer seek to convince you,” he told her. “You are here for another reason entirely. You see, even if you do not share my beliefs or those of my followers, you are still a young witch of pure blood, and you can still be made useful.”

A shiver trailed down her spine, her whole body stiffening. At length, she shook her head, blinking away a growing wealth of tears.

"Oh, none of that," said Voldemort, in a lightly chiding tone. "You said it yourself; you've made your decision. Now I've made mine."

It took everything within her to keep the word, "Please," from slipping out.

"Tavaris is one of my oldest followers, and the only one of whom without an heir. You, Miss Greenwood, will provide him with one. After that …" Voldemort paused, appearing to think. "Well, after that, he can do with you as he pleases. I will have no further use for you myself."

His lips twitched again.

"I can see that you want to beg. Do so if you must, but you should already know that it will only serve to waste your time. Nothing you say or do will save you from your fate."

Hermione turned her head away, not wanting him to see the defeat she sensed sinking into her face. She had no wand and no one to help her; no one would even notice that she was missing until tomorrow morning, when ten o'clock came and went without her showing up at the library to meet Madam Pince.

For a second, she considered telling Voldemort that she was not a pure-blood at all, but that was sure to lead to her immediate death. To die was not an option when she had people waiting for her back home. It could not be helped; she would have to go along with his plans until an opportunity to escape presented itself.

Voldemort rose to his feet, and she flinched. He did not, however, make any move to approach or attack her. Instead, he went to rap his knuckles against a pair of large double doors — the only exit besides the windows. One door opened slightly, and he told whoever was on the other side to, "Fetch Nott."

No, Hermione thought in horror, shaking her head again. *Please, no. Don't let it be him.*

The door opened all the way less than a minute later to admit the summoned wizard. She scampered to the far side of the sofa, beginning to shake.

"Join us, Tavaris," Voldemort said, waving him inside.

Tavaris Nott had dark hair, short and neat, and a face hard-edged and cruel. He was both tall and thin, lacking the stooped posture Hermione recalled from when she had incapacitated him with a Stunning Spell in the Battle of the Department of Mysteries; now, he towered over her, and his footsteps made scarcely a sound, unaccompanied by a walking-stick.

As his presence seeped further into the room, she was reminded of the monster lurking in the shadows of every one of her childhood nightmares: a vague embodiment of danger yet discovered. He eyed her with the familiar gaze of the man who waited in the darkened corners of the pub, who loitered outside of the gas station in the dead of night, and who made

young girls carry their keys between their knuckles as they walked home. Her skin crawled in his wake.

And she was to be his wife.

“She’ll do splendidly, my Lord,” he said after a long moment, his eyes lingering still. “Splendidly, indeed.”

This was not supposed to happen. This, Hermione was certain, had to be a mistake. Although she had not thought it possible, at some point, she must have messed up the timeline, perhaps even created an alternate one. All she knew was that she was not the one who married Tavaris Nott, and if she did, Theodore Nott would cease to exist.

And if Theodore Nott did not exist, he would not create his Time-Turners; if he did not create his Time-Turners, Hermione did not know what would happen to her.

“I’m pleased you agree,” Voldemort said, running his eyes over her himself. “Let us get on with tonight’s proceedings, then. Come, Miss Greenwood,” he added, extending his hand.

Hermione stared at it.

“Now, really,” he said, clicking his tongue again. “I thought Gryffindors were supposed to be brave.”

She clenched her jaw, glaring at him despite her fear. Upon realising she would not be taking his hand, he lowered it, once more appearing amused, and led her and Tavaris Nott from the room.

Four Death Eaters stood in the corridor outside: Abraxas Malfoy, Edmund Lestrange, someone whom she did not recognise, and whom she guessed was Mulciber Sr, from his resemblance to his son alone.

Dreadful suspicion rose thickly in her throat as they passed portrait after portrait, each gilded frame home to a wizard with white-blond hair. It was only once they had reached the front hall at the end of the corridor, however, that Hermione admitted to herself where they were: Malfoy Manor.

Shivers streaked across her skin, the small hairs rising at the back of her neck, her shoulders tensing with it. Panicking would not help her, though, and she forced herself to keep breathing, albeit shallowly. She had escaped this place once before, she reminded herself; she could do it again.

Their small procession came to a halt when they arrived at the large stone doors to the drawing room, where there stood a Lucius Malfoy who must have been in his mid-twenties with an equally young Narcissa Malfoy at his elbow and slightly behind him. Bowing their heads, they stepped aside. Lucius opened the doors with a wave of his wand, drawn from his front pocket rather than from the handle of a walking-stick, for that item remained in his father’s possession.

It was excessively and unnecessarily cruel that this should take place in the very room Hermione had once been tortured in, but they did not know that, of course.

Her eyes darted all around; a space wide and decadent, the tall walls a deep indigo and lined with more portraits, the drawing room looked almost the same as it had the last time that she had been eighteen. Overhead, the crystal chandelier dazzled, now an ominous presence, since she knew how it felt to wake with those crystals still piercing her skin and her body aching from, unconscious, having been crushed by the weight of its gold arms.

"Narcissa, if you would."

She jerked to attention as Narcissa came right up to her, drawing her wand. An arc of white light rid Hermione of her graduation robes, and at Narcissa's light murmuring, the dress she wore beneath soon turned a pearly-white and lengthened to graze the floor, then lengthened further.

"Might you have a specific style in mind?" Narcissa asked quietly, with an expression so earnest, positively uncharacteristic, that Hermione nearly pitied her. "After all, one only marries the once."

"Whatever you think is fine," Hermione murmured back, and as Narcissa continued working, she stood stiffly, staring straight ahead. Directly across the room was the other door, through which Fenrir Greyback had single-handedly dragged, all bound together, Ron, Harry, Dean Thomas, and Griphook the goblin. Between it and the centre of the room, there was the sofa, facing another and away from the fireplace; from there, the first jets of light had streaked overhead, a multi-coloured blur against her half-lidded eyes as she had stirred, sprawled on the floor.

Stood on that spot now were Edmund Lestrange and the two Death Eaters whose identities were yet clear. Both appeared the same fifty or so years in age as the elder Lestrange, Malfoy, and Nott wizards all did, even the Dark Lord himself. If one of the two unknown was indeed Mulciber Sr, she guessed the other must be the elder Avery, for both would have attended the ceremony that afternoon.

And from there, Hermione realised that this was the original Inner Circle who had her surrounded.

Narcissa's hand was suddenly on her face, cool and soft, the same as her voice as she said, "Chin up," then, in a minute, she was slipping behind her, each tug on Hermione's hair another shiver down her spine. It was another few minutes before Narcissa stepped back. "I believe this will be enough, my Lord."

"Come here, Miss Greenwood," said Voldemort's voice. Hermione turned to find she was being beckoned to the grand marble fireplace, a portrait of the four current Malfoys hanging above it rather than the gilded mirror, but before it, the same two armchairs from which Lucius and Draco Malfoy had risen, excited and reluctant, respectively. She recalled, later, all three Malfoys standing there, Lucius drinking from a goblet of wine as he watched.

The Dark Lord curled a teasing finger, beckoning her closer. Tavaris Nott was on his right, the elder Malfoy, Abraxas, on his left. The rest took their positions nearby, some smirking, others wearing full-fledged grins, looking oddly more like guests than they did guards. Be that as it may, all of them had their wands drawn.

“Now, we shall make this quick. Join hands.”

The tip of a wand was pressed to Hermione’s ribs — Abraxas — and she allowed the wizard in front of her to take hold of her hands, fighting to keep them from shaking too violently.

“Do you, Lord Tavaris Nott,” Voldemort began without preamble, his own wand raised and waiting, “take unto thyself as husband the Fair Miss Mione Greenwood and pledge unto her before these witnesses to be her protector, defender and sure resort, to honour and sustain her, in sickness and in health, in fair and in foul, with all thy worldly powers, to cherish and forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?”

“I will, my Lord,” Tavaris said, looking strangely as though he were trying not to laugh.

A thin, white cord slithered out of Voldemort’s wand and around Hermione’s and Tavaris’ wrists, binding them together. The latter’s gaze went above her head for a moment, supposedly to exchange a glance with Abraxas.

“Do you, Miss Mione Greenwood, take unto thyself the Noble Lord Tavaris Nott to be thy rightful lord Husband and pledge unto him before these witnesses to honour and cherish him, to cleave unto him, in sickness and in health, in fair and in foul, be his one true and lasting counsellor and solace, and forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?”

Abraxas jabbed Hermione with his wand, and she said, in a choked voice, “I will.”

A second cord, this one gold, wound itself around their joined hands.

“So mote it be,” said Voldemort, in a silky hiss, and with a flash, the cords sank into their skin, a hot prickling in their wake.

Shuddering, Hermione pulled her hands away. Tavaris did laugh then, releasing a soft snicker that was echoed at her back.

“The rings, Lucius.”

Lucius strode swiftly over, holding open a small chest lined with velvet to offer up two rings, both silver; the smaller one sported a large, gleaming emerald encircled by inlaid diamonds. Slow and smooth, Voldemort slid each ring onto their fingers, his skin like ice lingering on her knuckles, then he stepped away.

Edmund Lestrange approached with a smirk and an old camera. “Big smiles now,” he said, winking. “This is for the *Prophet.*”

“Pretend their tears of joy,” Narcissa told Hermione helpfully.

With another jab of Abraxas' wand, Hermione staggered forward, closer to Tavaris, who wrapped an arm around her waist, dragging her firmly into his side. She went rigid, staring into the lens of the camera as though its flash were the glinting blade of a guillotine that would soon fall on her neck.

When Edmund took the picture, she flinched, turning away instinctively, and she was forced to stand still for a second one.

"Champagne, anyone?" Tavaris said brightly, once Edmund was satisfied, and there came a loud, chuckling chorus of agreement from Edmund, Abraxas, and the elder Mulciber and Avery.

Something ominous glinted in Narcissa's eyes as she looked at Hermione now, and then she could not seem to look at her at all.

"Dobby!" shouted Abraxas, and Hermione flinched once more, shuffling back from the group as a house-elf in a clean, crisp pillowcase appeared with a soft *pop.* He carried a silver tray of champagne flutes and proceeded to go about offering them up, bowing to each hand as it reached out.

Too soon, Dobby reached her. He looked up with bulging green eyes, his bat-like ears flapping nervously, and she could not bring herself to move.

"We're waiting," Voldemort said, raising an eyebrow at her in warning. He and the others all had a fizzling flute in one hand and their wands in the other.

Her heart pounding, Hermione took the proffered drink, her fingers trembling as they closed around the crystal stem.

"A toast." Voldemort raised his flute, his eyes gleaming. "To Lord and Lady Nott. May your union bring many blessings to you and your house." He drank as a chorus of, "To Lord and Lady Nott!" rang out around him.

"To me!" said Tavaris, before swallowing the entirety of his drink.

Edmund sniggered into his own, glancing sidelong at Abraxas, who said, incredulous, "To *you*?"

"Is that not whom we are currently celebrating?"

"You are such a nuisance."

"And you're not? I seem to recall at *your* wedding —"

"Don't you start on this again —"

"— you had me make a toast, quite literally, to you."

"Well, one can hardly toast himself, Tavaris!"

Hermione gazed into the depths of her champagne long enough to see a tear splash against its surface. It would be another year before Theodore Nott was born; she still had a few months to correct whatever mistake had led to this, and if it turned out that this was what had happened the first time, too, then she had faith that she would escape.

She took a deep breath, steeling herself. *I have time,* she thought determinedly, raising her glass to her lips. *I've escaped before and I can do it again.*

Around her, voices rose, and laughter rang out, the sounds strangely distorted. The edges of her vision grew fuzzy, darkening. She glanced down at her still half-full flute, understanding dawning on her far too late.

This time, someone caught her when she began to fall; she could hear them laughing as she slipped away.

*

It was on an even softer surface than before that Hermione woke next, and several seconds passed before she became aware of the fact that the silken fabric brushing against her skin was that of pale-blue sheets, and not the tailored gown. She jolted upright, and at once, a sharp pain shot through her middle; she hunched over, gasping.

She was on a high four-poster bed that stood on one end of a large bedroom, which had white walls patterned with faded blue flowers and was lit by a chandelier of a dozen candles. On one side was an ornate vanity and a claw-footed wardrobe, and on the other was an antique desk and a filled bookcase. There were three doors: one on her right, one on her left, and one directly in front of her.

With shaking hands, Hermione lowered the sheet that covered her, and a gut-wrenching sob tore itself from her throat at the sight of her pink-stained thighs. She curled into herself, clutching at her neck in search of a gold ring and coming up empty.

"*No*," she whimpered. It felt as though her insides were being shredded by some unseeable, unstoppable force. "*No, no, no … Please, no …*" She let out a small sob.

To break, even for a few moments, would have been a relief, but now was not the time for that. Hermione tried to calm herself, or at least quiet. She pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes, sucking in a large breath and holding it until she couldn't; on the shuddering exhale, she forced herself to move. Slipping from the bed, bare and shivering, she crept quickly to the wardrobe.

It must have had an Undetectable Extension Charm on it, for its capacity for clothes was unexpectedly extensive: casual robes, formal ones, day dresses, evening gowns, stockings, and lacy lingerie, all of which were in various soft and muted tones. With haste, she dressed, yanking a breezy pastel dress over her head, and wincing with every pull of a muscle. Shoes lined the floor of the wardrobe, and she put on the only pair that did not have a heel, so she would have less of a chance of twisting an ankle while running, should running be made necessary.

The door at the end of the room was the largest, which she guessed meant that it was the exit and not the entrance to an ensuite; she pressed her ear against it, listening, and carefully opened it when she did not hear noise on the other side.

One step out the door, and Hermione knew that she was not in Malfoy Manor anymore.

She now stood in a massive, shadowed hall, so high and so wide that an entire house would probably fit within it. Panelled walls surrounded her, the same dark wood as the parquet flooring bracketing the stairwell that took up over half of the space. Four steps forward brought her to the wooden bannister, allowing her to peer down at the floor below. The stairs down were a few metres to her right and another set of stairs were up against the bannister opposite, leading to an upper floor.

Taking a steadying breath, Hermione began to creep down the stairs, limping with each step. The building was unmistakably old, and the steps *creaked* under her weight; she carried on with caution.

The hall beneath appeared to be the entrance, for at the very end were a set of big stone doors with narrow floor-length windows on either side of it, their views hidden behind thick, brown curtains. A large stained-glass window hovering on the landing and a few silver candelabras served as the only sources of light, and she had to pause for a moment to let her eyes adjust.

Thus far, no footsteps could be heard coming her way, but she remembered how silently Tavaris Nott had walked towards her before, so that provided little comfort. Her heart racing, she tiptoed across the front hall, glancing all around; double doors were on the wall to her right, an archway leading to utter darkness was on her left, and there were another set of doors next to the stairs.

Hermione released a relieved breath when she reached the front doors, her palms resting against them to hold herself steady. *I can do this,* she thought fiercely, and she slipped outside.

The sun greeted her warmly and she wanted to laugh in delight, but she was not completely out yet. The property was fenced in and surrounded mainly by forestry; dark trees that hid it away, making it appear inaccessible; wrought-iron gates faced her, sharp stakes at the top of it to injure any living thing that attempted to climb over. She turned round to look back at the building and promptly stumbled backwards, down the wide gravel drive that led to the gates.

It looked like something straight out of a Gothic horror novel; it was mountainous, for a house, and built up of weathered stone crawling with dead vines, the curtains of every one of the pointed-arch windows were drawn shut, and stone gargoyles perched alongside metal spires on the black gable rooftops, eerily still.

She spun on her heel and hurried down the drive, limping still. The gates opened under her hands and this time she really did laugh.

But it could not be that easy.

When Hermione attempted to cross the property line, she was met by an invisible wall; she raised her hands, pressing against it, but the wall remained unyielding.

"No," she whispered, her heart sinking. She shoved her entire body against the wall, crying out when it refused to budge. "No!"

She began to run along the fence, slipping her hands through the blackened iron bars only to find that the barrier continued. At one point, she picked up a rotting tree branch that had been laying in the dead, yellow grass beneath her feet and used it to jab at the barrier; the branch went through only as far as to where her hand gripped it, informing her that the barriers were designed to keep only living things from crossing the property line.

Or maybe just Hermione.

"As entertaining as this is, I have business elsewhere today."

She jumped, looking round and instinctively reaching for her wand, even knowing it was not there.

"They are Blood Wards, Lady Nott," Voldemort said. Just roughly two yards separated him from her. "You, and you alone, will be unable to pass through them without Tavaris' explicit permission." Stepping closer, he added, "And before you set off in search of Floo powder, know that the wards extend to the fireplaces."

Hermione shook her head, refusing to accept that.

"I have a task for you," said Voldemort, becoming impatient, "and as I said before, I have business elsewhere today. I do not have the time to wait until you lose hope. Gryffindors, I've learnt, do not do so quickly."

"I am no follower of yours," spat Hermione, giving him a venomous look. "Even *you* admitted that."

"This is true." He stepped closer still. "However, there are loose ends in need of tying up. You can either come with me of your own volition, or I shall make you. The choice is yours."

She threw one last desperate look at the wrought-iron fence. Ultimately, however, she knew that she did not really have a choice at all. Her fists clenched at her sides, she limped after Voldemort, following him back inside. He led her through the double doors on the left and into a long dining room with a fully-stocked bar and a table that sat twenty. Opposite the doors were another set, these ones paned-glass, and through them she could see a small conservatory brimming with magical greenery.

Voldemort took the seat at the head of the table and gestured to the chair on his right; she sat down with a pained grimace and watched as he laid out four sheets of parchment, an inkwell, and a quill.

"You are to copy these letters in your own hand," he told her, sliding over the first sheet of parchment, which was full of neat print, and a second one, which was blank.

Her hands trembling with a combination of fear and rage, Hermione pulled the letter towards herself and began to read.

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

I hope my sudden absence did not cause too much concern. I would have informed you of my plans earlier on, but I admit that I was wary of what you might say. I am tremendously grateful for your offer of assisting Madam Pince this summer, but that will no longer be necessary. I have recently been married, and my new husband has the funds to see to my every need. You will know him from both his days as a student at Hogwarts himself and through his work in the Wizengamot.

Apprenticing under the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher come September would have been a wonderful learning experience, but it has lost most of its appeal now that I no longer need accommodating. Nevertheless, I must thank you for your generosity. It has not gone unappreciated. I wish you the best of luck in your future endeavours.

Sincerely,

Lady Mione Nott

She clenched her teeth, fuming. Professor Dumbledore would know something was wrong the second he received this. Her thoughts gained speed, and she wondered, would he send help? If he did, what would happen? What if members of the Order of the Phoenix died attempting to rescue her, before they were supposed to? She couldn't even pass the property line; nothing they did would free her from this place. Involving anyone else was a risk that she could not take; again, she settled that she had to find a way out herself.

With watering eyes, Hermione picked up the quill, dipped it in the inkwell, and copied Voldemort's words onto the blank sheet of parchment. When she was done, however, she added one more line in her own words — words that would keep Professor Dumbledore from coming after her.

P.S. Don't worry, it's all for the greater good.

"I did not tell you to write that," Voldemort said.

"I'm aware of that," said Hermione, "however, you need not worry. It's the type of comment that will keep him up at night for years to come. One that only four other people alive would understand, and you can invade my mind all you want, but you will never be one of them."

Voldemort narrowed his eyes at her, the red in them glinting dangerously.

“The next one?” she said expectantly, holding out her hand.

He took her written letter and handed over the next, along with a second sheet of blank parchment.

This letter was much worse.

Dear Remus,

I have great news! I have just gotten married! I know it may seem sudden, but I have done a lot of thinking and I truly believe that this is the right choice for me. You know that following my parents’ death, I was left with virtually nothing. I arrived at Hogwarts with only the clothes on my back. Tavaris Nott can provide me with a life that would be otherwise unobtainable. These are difficult times, but with him, I know I will be safe.

I wish I could have invited you to the wedding, but it was a rather small affair. Just Tavaris, myself, and a few of his friends. Lily and Mary would have made wonderful bridesmaids, though.

I hope you are doing well. I would come visit you, but I am still adjusting to life at the Nott Estate. It’s massive! Perhaps sometime in the future, you and I shall have a chance to catch up.

With love,

Mione

Hermione stared at the letter until her vision grew blurry with tears. She imagined Remus sitting at his kitchen table, eating dinner, and glancing up when an owl began pecking at the window; she imagined him smiling upon seeing that the letter was from her, only to pale when he read her words. He would know it was all a lie; he would know that she had not written it of her own free will.

Remus would show the letter to Lily, Sirius, James, and Peter — maybe Mary and Marlene as well, and Alice and Frank. Perhaps they would go to Professor Dumbledore, only to be informed that there was nothing they could do.

This, Hermione realised suddenly, was why everyone had forgotten about her. Maybe she would escape, but they would never see her again, not really. She would break out of the Nott Estate and hide until the war was over, and they would all believe her dead.

She looked up at Voldemort, who was watching her closely, his wand in his hand and resting on the surface of the table, warning her what would happen if she did not comply.

“You are unimaginably cruel,” she said bravely.

“I disagree,” said Voldemort. “Cruelty only exists within the confines of one’s imagination, and my imagination is endless.”

Chapter End Notes

If anyone has any predictions, I'd really like to hear them:)

Escape the Estate

Chapter Summary

> Running through the parking lot
> He chased me and he wouldn’t stop
> Tag, you’re it, tag, tag, you’re it
> Grabbed my hand, pushed me down
> Took the words right out my mouth
> — Tag, You're It, Melanie Martinez

Chapter Notes

> CW: implied/referenced rape/non-con.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione remained in her seat at the dining room table long after Voldemort had left to send off the letters. She stared at the wall in front of her without truly seeing it, wondering how she was meant to get herself out of this. The ring on her finger refused to budge; it was as though the metal had been wielded into her very skin.

If she could steal Tavaris Nott’s wand, then she could place him under the Imperius Curse and force him to take down the wards. Perhaps there was also another wand — one whose owner had since passed — that she could find. The estate was old, so surely the belongings of its past occupants were still tucked away somewhere. That was what the Blacks had done, anyway; Number 12 Grimmauld Place had been full of all sorts of things left behind by those who had once resided there.

Perhaps there was a library — she knew that Draco had one at his family’s manor — and she could use it to look up Blood Wards. Maybe, by simply being with Tavaris, she would be able to pass through them. If he was unconscious, and she was holding him, maybe the wards would let her pass. All she needed was a heavy object with which to knock him out.

Hermione looked around: there were the glass bottles in the bar, but she did not know if they would be able to deliver a great enough blow; there was also an antique vase on an end table by the doors, but again, she did not know if it would do the job. Perhaps there was a marble bookend around there somewhere, like the kind she had in her own home back in 2020.

Obviously, she could not kill Tavaris because his son, Theodore, still had to be born, but incapacitation remained a perfectly acceptable method.

And then Hermione could flee to the Muggle world — another country, for good measure. She could find a job and a flat and bide her time until the war was over. That was what she should have done when she had arrived in this time; she should never have gone to Professor Dumbledore for help.

Eventually, the doors behind her opened. Silently, he came to stand directly behind her and place his hands on either side of her chair, leaning forwards so that she could feel his breath on the back of her neck; shivers ran down her spine.

“How are you this fine morning, darling?”

“Go to hell.”

Tavaris chuckled.

“I must say, your virginity was a pleasant surprise,” he said, still sounding amused. “As was that scar on your chest. If I were to ask where you got it, would you tell me the truth, or would you lie?”

“Lie,” said Hermione coldly.

“Well, I found it rather pretty.”

“You’re sick.”

Tavaris hummed in thought.

“Possibly,” he decided.

Her hands curled into fists in her lap.

“I thought I might give you a tour of the estate,” he said after a moment, finally backing away. In a second, he had yanked her chair away from the table, causing her to nearly topple out of it. “After all, it *is* your home now.”

“This place will never be my home.”

“Then I’ll have breakfast sent to you in your room,” he continued, as though she had not spoken. He grabbed her by the wrist and forced her out of her seat. “You shall have to be introduced to Dinky, of course, now you're the lady of the house.” Although Hermione struggled, he still managed to drag her round the table, adding cheerfully, “Let’s start with the conservatory.”

She tore her arm from his grasp but, nonetheless, followed him through the paned-glass doors.

The conservatory was small and bright with large floor-length windows, filled to the brim with magical plants, some of which sat in pots of various sizes and others which hung from the ceiling and walls, but one plant — a large fern — was very clearly non-magical.

Following her gaze, Tavaris said, “Be wary of that one there. He’s rather bitter about how his life turned out.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow, but he did not explain further.

“This is where I often take my afternoon tea,” he said, pointing to the circular table at the centre of the room, draped in a white lace tablecloth. “I’d ask you to join me today, but I suspect I’d have to bind you to the chair. Ah, well, to the next room.”

The hop in his step made her want to strangle him.

On the other side of the still-dark front hall stood the archway Hermione had spotted earlier, only now she was able to see past it; there was a room rather like a hallway with two more archways on either side and a slim door in the middle.

“That’s the powder room,” Tavaris said, pointing to the door. “On your left is the informal dining room — you were just in the formal one — and on your right is the sitting room.”

She only managed a short glimpse at a dark green sofa and grey rug before he dragged her into the informal dining room by the back of her dress. It was much smaller than the formal one, even more dimly-lit; she had to wonder why he seemed to prefer living in the dark.

“Through there —” Tavaris pointed to a door on one side of the room, “— is the stairs to the basement, where the kitchen and the — well, where the kitchen is.”

There was a miniature stone thestral on the table, but he took her back out to the front hall before she could reach for it. He pointed out the door next to the stairs and informed her it was his study and contained an entrance to the back grounds, and then he was climbing up to the first floor, still gripping the fabric at the back of her dress.

“This is your room, obviously,” he said, holding open the door to the room she had woken up in. “In case you didn’t already know, the door on the left is to your ensuite, and through here —” he opened the door on the right, taking her into a yellow-tiled bathroom with a big, clawfoot tub, “— is another bathroom which connects to —” this time, he simply kicked the door open, “— the nursery!”

The nursery was made up of soft greens and light greys and included a changing table, a bookcase, a comfortable-looking armchair, a toy chest, and a bassinet that practically mocked her with its presence.

“This way, when our son is wailing in the middle of the night, it shall be easy for you to reach him, should you wish to.”

“How do you know it will be a boy?” she could not help but ask.

Tavaris shrugged one shoulder.

“Wishful thinking, I suppose. If it isn’t, we shall just have to keep trying until we get one.”

Some of Hermione's horror must have shown on her face because he laughed before forcing her out the other door in the nursery and across the hall. There was another powder room there but, like before, he did not bother showing it to her. Instead, he released her to thrust open a set of double doors just to the right of it.

"This is the lady's parlour."

It was one of the more spacious rooms she had seen thus far, and definitely the most colourful: the walls were a royal blue, laden with floral tapestries, and the rug that covered most of the floor was a patterned sunflower-yellow; one of the sofas was the same blue as the walls and the other, white, had actual sunflowers emblazoned on its cushions; there was a grand piano, which was also blue; an easel with a spindly table next to it that held a set of watercolour paints and paintbrushes; a large, purple gramophone sat in the corner; and even the coffee table had brightly-coloured flowers painted on it.

Every room but this one and her own had the same Gothic appearance; the blatant sexism brought a small sneer to her face.

"You will likely end up spending most of your time here," Tavaris said, and Hermione scoffed, crossing her arms over her chest. "This is one of the few rooms I don't go in," he added, giving her a pointed look, "so yes, you likely will."

They went up to the second floor next, having seen all the first floor had to offer. He pointed out two guest rooms (each of which had an ensuite), showed her a hideous brown and Chudley-Cannon-orange drawing room, and then opened the doors to a long, dark hallway, reminiscent of a tunnel. The door at the very end of it seemed ominous, even more so when he told her that it led to the master bedroom. Hermione was quick to return to the landing.

"I do hope you like your room," Tavaris said as they walked back downstairs, Hermione's arms still crossed, although now in a more protective manner. "The last person it belonged to was my great-grandmother. I grew up on another property of ours — a place that would, if I do say so myself, put Malfoy Manor to shame — but I choose to live here instead because it riles up Abraxas; that I do so whilst I have access to a much better option makes all his shameless boasting twice as ridiculous as it already is."

The tour ended when they returned to her bedroom.

"I will have Dinky bring you your breakfast here. In the meantime, feel free to entertain yourself with a good book."

She scanned the bookcase, her eyes flitting from title to title.

"These are all about Household and Beauty Charms."

"Yes, I admit to having done that on purpose," said Tavaris, unapologetically. He stuffed his hands in his pockets. "I was curious to see the look on your face when you realised. I'll be in the library now," he added abruptly, spinning on his heels.

She looked at him sharply.

“You didn’t show me a library.”

But Tavaris was now halfway out the door, and simply said, “See you at dinner, darling,” before disappearing into the hall.

Scowling, Hermione looked back at the bookcase. She had not spent twenty-four hours in the presence of Tavaris Nott and she was already convinced that he was utterly insane.

A feeling of hopelessness began to creep up on her and she immediately squashed it. *I will get out,* she thought firmly. *I will find a way home.*

A sudden cramp had her hunching over, clutching her stomach; the position brought the mess between her thighs back to her attention. Grimacing, she forced herself into the ensuite.

It was, like the bedroom, powder-blue, and had marble counters and a clawfoot tub larger than the last, the feet and faucet both a glinting silver. Hermione filled the tub with water and slowly stripped down, beginning to tremble again. Goosebumps covered her arms and legs as she lowered herself into the warm water, hissing through her teeth the moment she hit the bottom.

She told herself that it didn’t matter and picked up a bar of soap. She told herself that she shouldn’t bother dwelling on it and scrubbed her thighs until her skin was raw. She told herself that she had suffered worse — that this was nothing — and fought through the piercing pain in her lower abdomen. She told herself that she was too strong to break down and ignored the fact that she still felt dirty even after the water had turned cold.

But if all these things were true, Hermione would not have been crying.

“You can do this,” she said, in a too-high voice, wrapping a warm, fluffy towel around herself. “You’re a survivor. This is — this is nothing.”

A sob slipped out, anyway, and she staggered, gripping the countertop.

“It’s *fine*. It’s nothing.”

Her reflection in the mirror shook its head, pitying. Hermione glared at it.

“I’ve survived worse,” she snapped. “This is *nothing*.”

The reflection raised a disbelieving eyebrow and, fuming, she stormed out of the bathroom.

In the bedroom awaited a thin, wrinkly house-elf with big, blue eyes and ears that stuck up like that of a rabbit would when it sensed a predator nearby. The house-elf wore a clean, forest-green pillowcase and scrutinised her with stern eyes and pursed lips, reminding her faintly of Professor McGonagall.

“I is being Dinky, Mistress Mione,” the elf said after a moment. “I cooks, cleans, minds babies, and also spies. You is not getting away with anything on Dinky’s watch.”

Hermione blinked.

Dinky blinked back.

“All right, Dinky,” she said, inhaling slowly. She released her breath, allowing her shoulders to lose some of their tension. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“You be thinking so,” Dinky told her wryly. They gestured to the tray of food sitting on the desk. “Eat, Mistress. Dinky will be back when you is done.” And with a small bow, they Disapparated.

Hermione spared the breakfast tray a single glance before turning to the wardrobe, because, really, as if she would be foolish enough to eat or drink anything that she was served here.

She put on a new dress, fresh undergarments, and the same shoes that she had been wearing prior, then, carefully, she left the room.

Neither Tavaris nor Dinky were nearby — not that she could see, anyway. She skulked downstairs and into the informal dining room, where the stone Thestral remained on the table. When she tried to pick it up, however, the Thestral would not budge. She pulled with all her might — to the point that she was panting — and still, it remained stuck.

Growling in frustration, Hermione went into the sitting room. There were two granite bookends sitting on a bookcase that reached the high ceiling and stood to the left of a grand stone fireplace, above which hung a portrait of a dark-haired wizard with a goatee and a haughty expression. He narrowed his eyes at her the second she stepped towards the bookcase.

“So, you must be the unfortunate witch who’s married my son,” he said, and he stuck out his chin. “Cantankerus Nott, my dear.”

Hermione paused, looking up at him.

“You wrote *Nature’s Nobility*,” she said.

“That, I did,” Cantankerus said pompously.

“It’s the most revolting piece of literature I’ve ever had the displeasure of reading,” said Hermione baldly.

Cantankerus made an indignant noise, then sneered.

“At least I did something with my life,” he said cruelly, “whereas you shall die within these walls having been nothing but the means to an end.”

Those words stung greater than she would have expected them to. “I’m the fucking Minister for Magic!” she wanted to shout. “I have an Order of Merlin — First Class! I helped save the wizarding world!” But she could not say any of that, because in this life, she really hadn’t done anything of importance.

With determination, Hermione ignored him, and made for the bookcase, pretending to search for better reading material than that which was in her room. She shifted one of the bookends

to the side and had to bite down on her lip to keep in her gasp of relief when it moved freely. To be certain that it was well and truly unattached, she picked it up so that it hovered over the wooden plank it sat on, then set it back down and began to sort through the books for real.

The fact that *Moste Potente Potions*, *Magick Moste Evile*, and *Secrets of the Darkest Art* were all openly displayed in the sitting room of all places was mind-boggling. It made her wonder what sort of books Tavaris deemed dark enough to actually hide.

After selecting Godelot's *Magick Moste Evile* in the hope that she could brush up on her knowledge on Blood Magic, she returned to the first-floor bedroom, suspecting that Dinky would soon be back for her breakfast tray.

Perhaps it was strange, or even grounds for suspicion, but Hermione had copies of several different Dark Arts texts in her office back in 2020. She had read *Magick Moste Evile* enough times that she knew to shut it gently or else it would let out a ghostly wail that never failed to irritate her. At seventeen years old, the contents of the book had been both unsettling and nauseating, but by the time she had been twenty, she had been able to relax on the sofa and idly flip its pages whilst nursing a cup of tea on a peaceful Sunday morning, her feet resting comfortably in Ron's lap.

"It's important to know your enemies," she would tell anyone who had asked her about it.

When she reached the bedroom, she kicked off her shoes, climbed up on the four-poster, and sat back against the heap of fluffy pillows, immediately turning to the chapter on Blood Magic that she needed to reread. From this spot, she had a clear view of all three doors, her back to nothing.

On the matter of Blood Magic, those who read on must first be forewarned that magicks such as these are never freely given, so cannot be treated lightly nor thought on sparingly. Be it spell or ritual, Blood Magic is never without sacrifice; blood, bones, and flesh, one's payment cannot by any means be undone, for it is the giving of that which we, as humans, are formed. Although there are some whom, lacking in spine and guided by their feeble hearts, may prefer to utilise the lesser beings who walk daringly upon this earth in fear of weakening themselves or their fellow witches and wizards, this form of sacrifice has not the power we with magic possess, and consequently, shall not yield results as great as were most probably promised. Therefore, it is the blood of those whose lives carry significance to the witch or wizard who has taken it upon themselves to explore the possibilities Blood Magic has to offer which can provide the most desirable results; the flesh of one's foe or the heartstrings of their lover be only two such examples.

Often while Hermione read something written by a witch or wizard who practised the Dark Arts, she felt as though she was reading the works of a particularly morbid philosopher. Their words flowed the same way: seemingly unending sentences, three paragraphs of contradictory thoughts to explain what could be said in a single sentence, and speech

designed to make them sound as intelligent as can be that frequently left the reader uncomprehending, not to mention battling a fierce headache.

The warnings on payment and sacrifice went on for another two pages, only to be followed by three more that debated the level of power provided from the sacrifice of non-magical animals, magical animals, Muggles, wizards and witches, friends, foes, family, and even the casters themselves. The conclusion that Godelot ultimately reached was that the greater the feelings shared between the caster and the sacrifice, whether those feelings were positive or negative, the greater the power achieved.

Hermione thought back on the ritual Voldemort had used in 1995 to regain his corporeal form; it had required the bone of his father, unknowingly given, the flesh of his servant, willingly given, and the blood of his enemy, forcibly taken. All three sacrifices carried strong feelings, either of hatred, devotion, or fear.

Finally, seven pages into the chapter, Godelot dove into the concept of protection.

There exist such sacrifices that may be used to protect that which an individual holds most dearly, whether by means of a shield, a disguise, or a threshold which cannot be trespassed, although there are, too, means that may be designed so that they may only be brought down once faced with the sacrifice of another, willingly given should they be so determined, or unwillingly given if this determination should belong to their foe. Alike protections are commonly chosen for the advantage of an intruder weakening themselves in their effort to gain entry —

The cave in which Voldemort had hidden Slytherin's Locket, Hermione recalled, had this exact type of protection; both Regulus Black and Professor Dumbledore had given their blood to gain entry. It seemed far too simple in her case, however; if all she must do to pass through the wards was slice open her palm, she could be out within the next ten minutes. Voldemort had stated that she, and she alone, could only leave the property with Tavaris' permission, so maybe it was not her own blood that required sacrificing, after all. If this were the case, she would need to find something sharp, although if she managed to knock Tavaris out with the bookend, she could just use his wand for that.

There was a *pop*, and Hermione glanced up to find Dinky standing by the untouched food on her desk, looking severely unimpressed.

"You cannot honestly expect me to eat or drink anything you give me," Hermione told them frankly. "I'm sure you're an excellent cook, Dinky, but I'm not stupid."

"Mistress Mione is going to starve with that attitude," Dinky muttered reprovingly. "But that is not being Dinky's problem, oh, no, it is not. Master Tavaris can force food down his stubborn wife's throat if he pleases, Dinky just be preparing it." They shook their head and snapped their fingers, causing the tray to vanish, then added, "Dinner be served in the

informal dining room at six if you be getting hungry, and you *will* because Dinky not be serving the ungrateful Mistress Mione any lunch."

With another *pop,* Dink was gone, and Hermione was faced with the unfortunate realisation that she would have to incapacitate them, too, if she wished to escape. How she would then face the house-elves under her care when she returned to the future, she did not know.

The Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare was, in her opinion, one of her greatest accomplishments. In 2020, S.P.E.W. was not too different from a workers' union and had worked closely with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and the Wizengamot. Knut by Knut and Sickle by Sickle, the salaries of house-elves had been raised from non-existent to two Sickles a week. Two optional sick days had now been available per month and each house-elf had been entitled to seven days off a year to be used whenever and if ever they pleased.

Each time a bill had passed through the Wizengamot to further the rights of house-elves, their masters had been given one week to comply with the new terms. If they had not, their house-elf would be sent on strike until their master had agreed. This, of course, had not applied to Hogwarts' elves, mainly because the headmistress, Professor McGonagall, had never failed to comply. During this period of strike, the house-elves would live at the Headquarters of S.P.E.W., which had been located at an old manor in Scotland that had been donated by Lucius Malfoy in 2005, after he and Hermione had gotten into a very public argument about his treatment of Dobby in the middle of Flourish and Blotts bookshop.

The manor had been on a piece of land big enough that S.P.E.W. had been able to build a farm there, complete with a field of crops, six chicken coops, five goats, a dozen cows, and a large barn. House-elves without a home had resided at the manor year-round with the same benefits as those with masters, and any house-elf at the manor had been assigned the job of their choosing, such as cleaning and maintenance, farming and gardening, cooking, healing, and even knitting. Additionally, that which was produced by the house-elves had been donated to families in need as well as both magical and non-magical orphanages. On top of all of that, volunteers had often come to the manor to teach subjects like history, geography, healing, reading, writing, and art to any house-elves who might have been interested in learning.

And if a house-elf had arrived bearing signs of abuse, an Auror and a representative from S.P.E.W. would have been sent to the home of their master to investigate; should the house-elf's master have been proven guilty of abuse, they would have been formally charged and tried, as well as blacklisted from ever owning another house-elf. Generous as Lucius' donation had been, there had no longer been any house-elves at Malfoy Manor for a reason. According to Albus Severus, who had heard from Scorpius, they had hired a cleaning crew which was made up of Squibs and visited weekly, and Draco and Narcissa had taken it in turns to cook (burn) all their meals.

The system that S.P.E.W. had run on was one of which Hermione was beyond proud, and for which she was sure — had she not been Minister for Magic and in charge of distributing such awards herself — she would likely have received another Order of Merlin. Therefore, if she were to hurt Dinky in any way, she would feel like an absolute fraud.

But she would do it if she had to.

With a heavy sigh, Hermione marked her page, set *Magick Moste Evile* aside, and devised a plan.

At exactly six o'clock, she entered the informal dining room and took the seat to Tavaris' left. He looked up in slight surprise, a bite of steak halfway to his mouth, and his lips stretched into a pleased smile.

"And here I was thinking your food would get cold," he said, lowering his fork.

Silently, Hermione picked up the plate of food before her, leaned over, and switched it with his. She did the same with their water goblets, much to his apparent amusement.

"Dinky!" he called, chortling, and he nodded to Hermione's goblet once Dinky had appeared at his side. "Fetch me a new drink, would you?"

Some of the tension bled from Hermione's shoulders and she drank from his goblet almost greedily, parched.

Neither one of them spoke much throughout the meal. It seemed to her that Tavaris might simply enjoy her company — why that was, she did not know, and she wasn't sure if she wanted to. As they ate, she observed him, trying to pick up on any weaknesses that could reasonably be taken advantage of.

The Tavaris Nott whom she knew from her childhood was small and frail, and had even walked with the aid of a walking-stick. Hermione couldn't sort out how he had weakened to such a degree over a span of under two decades, especially when, unlike many of his cohorts, he did not go to Azkaban. Perhaps he had grown ill, or even depressed, with his precious Dark Lord no longer there to lead him. She wished that he was already weakened, for that would make her job far easier.

After dinner, he requested that she join him for a drink, and she feigned reluctance before eventually agreeing. She then followed him into the sitting room, glancing about warily, and hid a triumphant grin when he immediately cast a Silencing Charm on his father's portrait and slipped his wand back into the front-right pocket of his robes.

"I suppose I should give you a bit of a rundown," Tavaris said, with a small sigh. He approached the silver drink cart by the windows and went about fixing them each a tumbler of what appeared to be firewhiskey; she watched carefully to ensure that he wasn't putting anything in her drink — again. "On what your life here will look like, that is. Rules and such, you understand."

He handed her a tumbler and plopped down on one of the sofas, kicking his feet up on the coffee table (Cantankerus glared down at him).

"You have permission to go wherever you'd like — there aren't any restrictions where your mobility is concerned — but I ask that you keep out of my study at times in which I have

company. This will happen quite frequently, due to the requirements of the task that has been assigned to me by the Dark Lord."

"And what task might that be?" Hermione asked, sitting down on the opposite sofa.

"More and more noble wizards and witches are joining our cause every day, and the Dark Lord hasn't the time to train them all," said Tavaris. He raised his drink to her before taking a large sip, then continued. "That is where I come in; anyone whom he wishes to have trained is sent directly to me. Had you taken the Dark Lord up on his offer, one of those people would have been you."

"I don't regret my decision."

"No, I didn't think so. Anyway —" he waved his hand flippantly, "— there will be a number of young people coming and going, especially in the summers. As a matter of fact, a recent graduate from Hogwarts will be arriving next week for a lesson on spell-creation. It's something of a specialty of mine. You are, of course, free to speak to anyone you wish, just as you are free to ignore them entirely."

Hermione nodded as though this mattered to her. She took a small sip of her drink, and it burned her throat on its way down, lighting a blazing fire in the pit of her stomach.

"There are times when I shall be away — likely either at the Ministry or attending a meeting with the Dark Lord — during which you will be alone here. As I said, you can go wherever you'd like, but know that Dinky will be keeping an eye on you and will intervene should you cause any trouble.

"Abraxas and Edmund visit on Thursday evenings, unless any of us have a prior engagement, and we are often joined by Cygnus Black. You were a friend of his nephew's, if I recall correctly. Sirius."

Again, Hermione nodded, saying nothing. She took another sip of her drink and felt the fire travel from her stomach to the rest of her body, igniting her very bones with liquid courage.

"Shame what happened to him," Tavaris went on blithely, slouching to rest his head on the back of the sofa, "letting all those blood traitors and half-bloods brainwash him the way they did. But his brother, Regulus, has stepped up to take his place. Quiet, that one, but he's a good speaker — needs to be, given that he's now the sole heir of House Black. He'll be taking the Dark Lord's Mark in a few weeks' time — his cousin, Bellatrix, vouched for him. You know, I suspect, in another life now, she and you would have made good friends."

Hermione could feel her face contorting, affronted. She opened and closed her mouth several times, but no sound came out. Tavaris finished his drink and went to pour himself a new one, completely oblivious.

"She told me so herself, before hearing that you had declined the offer to join us. 'I shall take her under my wing,' she said, 'show her how it's done.' Her husband, Rodolphus — Edmund's eldest — said she had been fantasising about having another witch about — one who was actually willing to get her hands dirty.

“Bellatrix is the sister of Narcissa, whom you met the other night,” he went on. “They’ve another sister — Andromeda — but she was disowned several years ago. Married a Mudblood.” He shook his head in mild disbelief. “Really, darling, at this point every generation of Blacks has at least one child who goes round the bend. When I was a boy, there was Lucretia, who married a Prewett — although she has yet to be disowned for that; Ignatius is awfully quiet about his beliefs, you see — and then there was Cedrella, who married a *Weasley* —” his sneer made her eye twitch, “— and before that was Dorea. *She* married a Potter. I don’t care how many times Pollux Black claims there had been no other pure-blood willing to take her after their sister went and disgraced herself, a Potter is still a Potter.”

Hermione glanced back at the bookcase while his back was turned, eagerly awaiting a reason to approach it.

“Poor Orion, though,” Tavaris muttered, returning to his seat with a fresh tumbler. “At least in Cygnus’ case, he had only daughters — and three, at that. Andromeda served little purpose. *Sirius*, on the other hand … Well, it really is a pity, isn’t it?”

He waited for her to respond this time.

“Oh, yes, a terrible pity that Sirius doesn’t wish to kill Muggles and Muggle-borns for sport,” said Hermione, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “How tragic.”

Tavaris chuckled.

“You’ve a sense of humour,” he said. “That’s nice.”

“I’m glad I could be of some amusement to you.”

He chuckled again, then sipped his drink and sighed, his head lolling against the back of the sofa.

“You know, Cedrella and Septimus went on to have three sons, and one of them’s now married to the niece of Lucretia and Ignatius. Funny, how that happens, don’t you think? *Five* sons thus far. It’s remarkable. If only the Prewetts hadn’t become such Mudblood-lovers in the last few decades — otherwise those boys would’ve been a massive boon to the House of — would you quit trying to involve yourself in the conversation?”

Hermione craned her neck to catch Cantankerus go from nodding in grim agreement to sneering at his son. Shaking his head, Tavaris rose to refill his drink again (she did not know how he had managed to finish the previous one so quickly) and then sat down beside her, his back now to his father — and the bookcase.

“He insisted upon having his portrait here when I moved in,” he told her, annoyed. “Claimed I needed him for *guidance*. Always was a bumptious bastard.”

His wand was poking out of his pocket.

“Tavaris,” Hermione began tentatively, the name tasting strange on her tongue, “I was wondering … those books over there —” She gestured behind them. “Might I be allowed to read them?”

Tavaris smirked against the rim of his tumbler. “I didn’t actually expect you to lay a finger on any of the books in your room,” he admitted. “By all means, go ahead.”

She stood, setting her own tumbler down on the coffee table, and slowly stepped up to the bookcase. For several minutes, she pretended to peruse his collection, her expression a cross between apprehensive and curious, meanwhile he carried on complaining about his father. When, inevitably, he paused to sip his drink, she made her voice small and asked, “May I take this?”

Tavaris glanced at her over his shoulder, smirking again at the sight of *Secrets of the Darkest Art* in her hand.

“Certainly not the average Gryffindor, are you?”

Hermione shook her head sheepishly. Sniggering, he faced forward once more. With as little noise possible, she slid the granite bookend off the shelf and replaced it with *Secrets of the Darkest Art*, angling the book to keep the others propped up.

Cantankerus was cursing silently from within the confines of his portrait, gesturing madly in an attempt to seize his son’s attention. Alas, Tavaris was too distracted by the sound of his own voice and did not notice anything was amiss until it was too late; she was already standing behind him, lifting the bookend high into the air —

“*You* —” He did not get the chance to finish his sentence before Hermione brought it down and slammed it against his head; with a grunt, he collapsed sideways on the sofa, unconscious. Blood trickled down the side of his face.

Without hesitation, she leaned over the back of the sofa to slip his wand out of his pocket. It did not feel like much — she doubted it would serve her well — but it would have to do. She raised it, waiting, and the second Dinky Apparated into the room, she shouted, “*Stupefy*!”

The elf dropped to the floor.

“All right,” Hermione muttered to herself, taking a deep breath. “All right …” She cast a Levitation Charm, and Tavaris’ body rose into the air; she carefully guided it from the sitting room without looking back. “This had really better work.”

The grounds were dark, yet the wrought-iron fence remained visible, glinting in the moonlight. She let Tavaris fall the moment she reached it, his body flopping lifelessly on the dead grass. Bending down, she grasped his hand, turned it palm-up, and dragged the tip of his wand across it in a straight line.

“*Diffindo*,” she murmured, and she smiled when it sliced his skin. Still grasping his hand, she shoved it between the bars of the fence; it went right through, stopping when her own hand met the invisible barrier. Huffing in frustration, she used an Unlocking Charm to open the

front gates, then tried again, only to achieve the same result. With a second Cutting Curse, she sliced open her own palm.

Nothing happened.

"Shit … *shit*." Hermione smeared her blood across the barrier, gaping breathlessly at the seemingly impossible image it created. "*Shit*!"

There was a low, pained groan from below her, and when she looked, Tavaris was gazing up at her with a dazed expression. She pointed his wand at his face.

"Tell me how to get through the wards!" she demanded. "Tell me, and I'll leave you be!"

For some absurd reason, Hermione had expected him to laugh. But this was not what happened.

Tavaris' expression darkened.

"Are you going to kill me, darling?" he whispered, taunting. "I must say I'm surprised. I really didn't think you had it in you."

Hermione's nostrils flared as she glared at him. Without giving herself time to think, she lowered his wand.

"*Sectumsempra*!"

At once, Tavaris was crying out in agony, rolling onto his side to clutch at his thigh, blood seeping out from between his fingers, beginning to pool on the grass.

"*Tell me how to get through the wards*," Hermione repeated, wand still raised. "Or would you prefer I cut a little deeper? You don't really *need* both legs, do you?"

As a matter of fact, he did need both legs, but he did not know that.

"I'm not telling you a *thing*," Tavaris spat venomously, glaring back up at her. He was already paling from blood loss.

"Are you sure you don't want to rethink that decision?" she asked, with a pointed jerk of his wand. "I could leave you to bleed out, you realise. How long do you think it would take? A few minutes? An hour?"

"If I die, you will never know how to get through the wards," he snarled. "Are you sure *you* don't want to rethink *that* decision?"

"Does your life truly mean so little to you?"

"The Dark Lord does not want Dumbledore getting his hands on you. I would gladly die before going against his wishes."

Hermione sneered.

"*You are pathetic*."

"I am *loyal*. Possibly the *most* loyal," said Tavaris furiously, gritting his teeth as he fought the pain in his leg, "and if you consider that pathetic then you are even less the witch that I thought you were."

"You know *nothing* about me."

"And nor do *you* know anything about *me* if you're under the impression that I would leave myself unprotected." His eyes seemed to shine then, malevolent in the moonlight. "Tell me, Mione, did you think Dinky was my *only* house-elf?" Before Hermione could do more than blink, he added, "Goppy!"

There was a *pop*, and an old, slumping house-elf whom she did not recognise appeared in front of them. With a snap of their fingers, Tavaris' wand flew from her hand and into their grasp.

She staggered back in fear.

"Meet Goppy. He looks after that other property I was telling you about," said Tavaris, his voice strained. He let his head fall back as he panted, still clutching his injured thigh. "Take her to the cellar, Goppy."

Hermione did not dwell there to debate it; she ran. Her heart was pounding in her chest, and she hadn't a clue where she was going, but she ran, nonetheless.

With another *pop*, Goppy stood before her. She darted to the side, but he Apparated again, blocking her path. Before she could even attempt to dodge him a second time, his hand shot out; skeletal fingers grasped her wrist, nails digging into her skin, and a split-second later, she was whisked away.

Chapter End Notes

Please remember that while Hermione is smart, she is not a god. She is flawed, just like everyone else. I know this story has gotten pretty dark, and if that wasn't what you signed up for, that's perfectly okay. There will be light spots, it will get better, but not until the war is over.

I did add the tag Hermione Granger/Nott Sr, but I promise it's not a real pairing. I debated whether or not to add it for a long time, but in the end, I decided to anyway because they're married.

As for the mention of Hermione having Dark Arts texts in her office, that is cannon and mentioned in the Cursed Child. The information on S.P.E.W., on the other hand, was what I came up with myself.

Waiting and Wondering

Chapter Summary

> What makes this fragile world go 'round?
> Were you ever lost?
> Was she ever found?
> — Space Song, Beach House

Chapter Notes

> CW: depression, panic attack/PTSD episode, and Bellatrix Lestrange.
>
> Several quotes in this chapter were taken directly from Ch.23, Malfoy Manor, of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows. All credits go to JKR, but you know that already.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione and Ron had gotten married by the orchard in the backyard of the Burrow in the summer of 2000. The wedding had initially been intended to be quite small, but as it turned out, they both knew a great deal more people than they had previously realised, and before they had known it, there had been over one-hundred people on the guest list. Everything had been organised by Molly Weasley, Hermione's mother, Helen, and Hermione herself, and — if what Hermione had been told was true — it had gone exactly according to plan.

Except for the minor issue of Harry Potter being a terrible best man and his fiancée, Ginny Weasley, being an even worse maid of honour. Both Hermione and Ron had been plied with copious amounts of alcohol prior to the ceremony: "for the nerves," according to Harry, and "to celebrate," according to Ginny. The groomsmen — Neville Longbottom and George Weasley — and the bridesmaids — Luna Lovegood and Fleur Delacour — had been absolutely no help in the matter, sitting back as they had and letting Harry and Ginny pour drink after drink. As a result, neither Hermione nor Ron remembered much of the ceremony.

But what they did remember was wonderfully, beautifully, and gloriously happy.

The honeymoon had been in Australia. Ron had wanted to go for a month, but Hermione had wheedled him down to two weeks (honestly, she couldn't miss that much work). They had spent their days on the beach; Hermione reading and Ron napping on top of her, dutifully protecting her from getting sunburnt at great personal risk to himself. Those two weeks had been just as happy as the wedding had, and they remembered much more of them.

Hermione's second honeymoon was not nearly as happy, to put it lightly.

The cellar was cold and dark. She did not know how long she had been there, but it had been long enough that her stomach had begun to cave in on itself and she had been forced to make use of the bucket in the corner more than once.

She laid curled on the floor, fighting to stay awake, although she knew it was pointless. Her eyes, half-open, rested unwaveringly on the wrought-iron door as she waited. What it was that she was waiting for, she did not quite know anymore. Food, perhaps, or to be let out. Waiting, she found, was surprisingly easy when one had nothing better to do.

Maybe Hermione should have been utilising this time to devise another plan, but that was about as pointless as it was to stay awake; there was nothing she could do, not really, and even if there was, she no longer had the energy to spare.

According to what she could recall, twelve Death Eaters would be sent to Azkaban in a few years' time: Antonin Dolohov, Augustus Rookwood, Angus Mulciber, Igor Karcaroff, Thorfinn Rowle, Eamon Travers, Brinley Gibbon, Maverick Jugson, Barty Crouch Jr, and Bellatrix, Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrange. Shortly thereafter, Barty would escape with the help of his parents and Karcaroff would trade information in return for his release. The rest of the Death Eaters, including Tavaris Nott, would be declared innocent of their crimes, assuming they were questioned at all.

Hermione's hope to go to the Department of Mysteries in November of 1981 had officially been squashed.

If she could not escape the Nott Estate, and Tavaris got off scot-free, then she could not see how she would ever return to the future, except by waiting for it. She wondered if perhaps that was what she was waiting for. Luckily, the stone floor had grown rather comfortable.

Sometimes, she wondered if the rules of time-travel she had been taught were not meant to be interpreted the way she had: she wondered if she really had changed something; if this was not how it had gone the first time around, after all. It had been her firm belief that time was a loop, but she found herself questioning that now, possibly for the sole reason that she did not want to admit what this theory might mean for her.

When the door finally opened, Hermione jolted awake, unaware that she had nodded off at all. She sat up so quickly that she made herself dizzy, and it took a second for her vision to clear.

The sight that greeted her once it had made her feel as though an invisible hand had reached into her chest and torn her heart straight from it.

Tavaris stood in the doorway, supported by a walking-stick.

And this was the proof that she had needed: the sign that told her she had been right all along; there was nothing she could do to stop any of this, because it had already happened. He had been weak when she knew him. His posture had been stooped, she now realised, from nearly eighteen years spent relying on his walking-stick to stay upright.

The walking-stick that he required because of what she herself had done to him.

“Gaspar Avery bet me that you would attempt to kill me within the first twenty-four hours,” Tavaris told her. His face was cold and blank. “I feel rather an idiot now for believing otherwise.”

Hermione didn’t say anything. She didn’t even move, paralysed with fear. The walls seemed to be closing in on her, the air suddenly stifling, and she was unsure whether this was a product of her imagination or not.

“I didn’t have to give you a room of your own, you know,” Tavaris continued, still with a white-knuckled grip on the straight handle of the walking-stick. “Nor did I have to give you permission to roam, or even slip you a Sleeping Draught. The Incarcerous Spell would’ve worked just as well.” He narrowed his eyes, some combination of thoughtful and calculating. “Would you prefer that, Mione? Would you prefer to remember everything I do to you? Do you wish to spend the rest of your life here, on this very floor? I can make that happen … if you wish me to.”

Tears welled up in her eyes; she blinked, letting them fall.

“You have no way out of here. Even if Dumbledore were to send his little Order to rescue you, even if I were dead, you would still be unable to pass the property line. So, you can either do as you’re told, and live here as happily as you allow yourself to, or you can continue to fight me, and remain a prisoner. But before you make your decision, know this: prisoners don’t live very long.”

Hermione had been a fighter all her life, but she could not see how she could fight this — not without losing. A feeling of defeat washed over her, so overwhelming that she felt as though she may drown in it. The walls continued to shift, edging closer and closer, and her breaths grew increasingly uneven.

In the end, she did not have a choice. It was either comply or die a lot sooner than she would otherwise. Dying was not an option when she had a family waiting for her back home. She had to live long enough to find a way back to them, no matter how long it took or what she had to do in the meantime.

Perhaps this might still count as fighting: fighting to not fight at all.

On numb, shaking legs, Hermione stood, using the wall for support, and pushing on it to keep it from crushing her. She walked unsteadily past Tavaris, straight out the door.

He let her.

The narrow hallway outside of the cell was no less dark. She passed three more wrought-iron doors on her way down it, pushing open another, larger one, and staggering into the basement kitchen, a jarringly warm and bright place with wooden cupboards and copper pots and pans that hung from the ceiling.

Dinky stood on a stool by the stove, stirring a pot of what appeared to be some sort of stew. Hermione barely spared them a glance before turning up the stairs, not bothering to wait for Tavaris. She emerged from the door at the top of the stone stairs and into the informal dining room, then continued through it, crossed the front hall, and began the climb up to the first floor.

She could hear Tavaris' walking-stick hitting the floor behind her — tiny *thuds* that coincided with every step he took — but did not look back. Not even when she reached her bedroom and sat down on her bed, her gaze on the floor as he entered after her. Her heart was pounding in her ears, her breathing little more than wavering inhales that did not always reach her lungs, and every nerve in her body was screaming at her to leave — to run — but still, she did not move.

The war had already been won; Voldemort had already been defeated. The future from which she had come was a time of peace. It was a time in which wizards and witches who believed in blood-supremacy were too afraid to admit it, a time in which Muggle-borns were welcomed into every one of the Hogwarts Houses with open arms and Scorpius Malfoy was bullied by his fellow Slytherins for being related to ex-Death Eaters, and a time in which the Minister for Magic was a Muggle-born herself. There was absolutely nothing that Hermione would not do to ensure this future came to pass.

And if this was what had happened the first time around, then it was what had to happen this time, too.

Tavaris came to a halt before her and reached into the pocket of his robes with his free hand, taking out a vial of dark purple potion. He said nothing, only held it out to her: a choice, but not really.

She took it.

*

When Hermione had been thirteen years old, she and her parents had toured a historic house museum in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon; more specifically, the former home of William Shakespeare, preserved over the centuries to look just as it had when he had last resided there. Throughout the tour, Hermione had shot question after question at the guide, gazing about in wide-eyed wonder. While the house had retained great beauty and intrigue, however, there had remained the unmistakable air of death.

This was what roaming the halls of the Nott Estate felt like. There was an almost palpable emptiness to it, despite the rooms full of furniture and the belongings that littered nearly every surface. Touching anything felt somehow wrong, like those things did not belong to her and to act as though they did would be unforgivable.

But Hermione had little else to do. Over the course of the next week, she explored the estate, learned every crook and cranny she came across, memorised the spine of every book she found, ate when she was given food, slept when she was offered a potion, bathed when she woke, and did her very best to avoid thinking.

That last bit was harder said than done. Still, she tried. Every time her mind began to wander, she would find a new book to read, or else visit the lady's parlour and practice playing the piano, forcing herself to focus on nothing but the notes before her. She had taken lessons as a child, but it had been years since she had last played. Slowly, bit by bit, she began teaching herself anew. By the end of the first week, she had not made much progress, but at least she had succeeded in occupying her mind.

She did not see much of Tavaris, and when she did, neither one of them spoke more than a few words at a time. It brought her to the realisation that he had been in an exceptionally good mood when she had arrived. Perhaps he had been lonely and longing for company, someone with whom he could share his thoughts, and that was why he had been so cheerful and talkative. Whatever the reason was, it did not matter. He was mostly silent now, his expressions holding little to no emotion, and he frequently glared at his walking-stick, often then turning to her, as if to say, "I won't be forgetting this."

The first day of Hermione's second week at the Nott Estate was without the usual clouds of grey, so she took a floral quilt from the lady's parlour and a copy of *An Anthology of Eighteenth-Century Charms* from the drawing room on the second floor and went to read on the lawn outside, directly behind the estate.

It was easy to forget where she was then, sprawled out on the quilt in the sunshine, reading. If she was distracted enough, fully immersed within the pages, she could trick herself into thinking that she was someplace else; the rest of the world melted away when she had a book in her hand. It was the most relaxed she had been since afternoons spent in the library with Remus, Lily, Mary, and Pandora. Realising this, however, led her to wonder, no matter how hard she tried to stop herself from doing so, what they were each doing at that moment.

Remus and Lily had already been inducted into the Order, Hermione was sure, and Pandora was on her summer holiday, but she didn't know about Mary. Perhaps she had gotten that job in Diagon Alley that she had been hoping for; perhaps she had already met Reginald Cattermole, or soon would.

Did Pandora and Mary know what had happened to her? Remus had told Lily, surely, but had they passed the news on to Mary yet? Who would be there to tell Pandora? Would she only find out when she returned to Hogwarts to discover that Hermione was no longer there? Or had she seen that photograph in *The Daily Prophet* of that farce of a wedding, which Edmund Lestrange had taken? Had any of them written to Hermione, and she just hadn't received their letters? Was Tavaris hiding them somewhere within the estate?

Hermione set her book down and sat up, unable to concentrate anymore and too restless to remain still. In the distance, she could spot the cemetery, where every member of the Nott family had been buried. It rested beyond a tree-filled slope, positioned just on the edge of the surrounding forest, and was enclosed in a short gated-fence. It would have been rather interesting to stroll through the cemetery, reading the names on the tombstones, but it was on the other side of the much taller fence caging her in.

The graves taunted her, leaving her to imagine them inscribed with names that would never truly be there: the names of those whom she knew would soon die, and whom she had never

imagined knowing in the first place. She wondered where Pandora would be buried, when she died. Would there even be a body to bury?

“She liked to experiment, Mum, and one day one of her spells went badly wrong,” Luna had said to her once, many years ago yet, at the same time, many away. “It was rather horrible.” She had shaken her head then, pursing her lips slightly. “No, not rather … It was just horrible.”

Luna had been nine years old when it had happened, so Pandora would die in either 1989 or 1990, suddenly and horribly. Selfishly, Hermione hoped to be long gone, back to the future, before that happened.

If she got back to the future, that was. How old would she be, if she was forced to simply wait, biding her time? Too old, was the answer: much too old; grey-haired and frail, she imagined. At least, if that were the case, she would still be back before Ron was caused too much worry. Hopefully, he wouldn’t have the chance to alert Harry. They would worry when they saw her, of course, but that was better than not seeing her at all; it was better than wondering, like she was doing now.

It was the subject of her immediate future that Hermione did her best to avoid, and there was a great deal less wondering in that. It was a realisation, in truth, and one that she had already come to, but could not say aloud, nor even in her own head.

Strange, how that worked — how one could hide their own thoughts from themself, yet know they were there, nonetheless.

Because Hermione knew, deep down, what it meant that she was here, in this moment, in this time; she simply refused to let herself think it. She knew what it meant that she was at the Nott Estate; she knew what it meant that she was married to Tavaris Nott; she knew what it meant that she was taking those Sleeping Draughts every few days; and she knew what it meant that Theodore Nott would be born in just over a year.

And she knew what it meant that she was Mrs Nott — Lady Nott, if one was feeling particularly pretentious.

But Hermione did not think it.

She sensed eyes on her, her skin crawling, and turned her head, looking back towards the estate. Peering at her through the window of Tavaris’ study, his nose nearly touching the glass, was Snape.

Ah, she thought, *the “students.”*

Snape sneered at her, then drew the curtains shut. He was not yet a spy, nor whom one could rightfully call a good person; presently, he was a Death Eater, and proud of it.

What an idiot.

It was somewhat fascinating, though, to see this side of Snape: the side of him that he would spend the rest of his life repenting for. It was something to focus on, so she did; rather than taking her dinner in her room that night, she joined Snape and Tavaris in the informal dining room, again much to the latter's surprise. Even Dinky was taken aback, and *popped* away to grab another place setting.

"You look well, Severus," Hermione said, in feigned politeness. "Have you done something new to your hair?"

She may have been feeling rather bitter — just a little bit. After all, he was one of the people who had informed Voldemort about her.

"Apart from washing it, no," Snape replied coolly.

"Shame. A little more shampoo would've done you good."

Tavaris coughed to cover up a small chuckle.

"I see you're still lacking that pregnancy glow," said Snape smoothly, giving Hermione a cruel smile. "No matter. You can always try again … and again… and *again* …"

She bit down on the inside of her cheek, forcing her temper in check. Dinky reappeared with another place setting, and she laid her napkin on her lap.

If only she could tell him about the time that she had set him on fire. Alas, she could not.

Pity.

"What were the two of you working on today?" she asked.

"The matter of spell-creation," said Tavaris, pouring himself a goblet of wine. He gave her a strange look. "Severus is quite creative, you know. He has a rather impressive collection of spells, all his own creation."

Hermione froze in the act of cutting up her steak, then forced herself to resume.

"Is that so?" she said lightly.

"Mm. Indeed. Potions is another strength of his, but we'll be starting on that two weeks from now. He's just begun studying under a Potions Master — Arsenius Jigger, I've no doubt you've heard of him — but there are certain things he can only learn privately."

"You mean anything illegal."

Tavaris waved his fork in a dismissive motion, then stabbed a piece of his steak and ate it.

"How often will he be visiting?" Hermione asked him, before taking a bite of her own.

"Biweekly," said Tavaris, after chewing. "Saturdays, unless either of us have a prior engagement, in which case it will be rescheduled. The little Black heir will be here every

Monday —"

She inhaled sharply —

"— as will Bartemius Crouch's son." He chuckled, giving his head a shake. "It will never cease to amuse me that our Lord was able to recruit the son of the Head of Magical Law Enforcement."

Snape, too, chuckled.

"Those two will be here more often than anyone else this summer, and likely the next, too, as they're both still in school. The Dark Lord wants them sufficiently trained. The future Lord Black is a valuable ally, you see, particularly in the Wizengamot, and Bartemius Jr will make for the perfect spy; our eyes and ears within the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

Tavaris paused to sip his wine, then continued. Apparently, now that Hermione had made the move to join him, he was once again eager to share.

"The littlest Lestrange, Gaspar and Angus will all be here on occasion, though not nearly as frequently. They each have a father to learn from, already loyal to our Lord. Orion Black hasn't the time nor the knowledge. Now, if it was warding Regulus needed to study, then he could go to his father — paranoid bastard that he is — but anything else … I'd say he's better off coming to me. Oh, and the little Rosier. He'll be joining that group as well.

"And then, the last Sunday of each month, Bellatrix will be here —"

Hermione dropped her fork; it clattered on her plate, leaving a ringing silence in its wake. With numb fingers, she forced herself to pick it up and keep eating.

"The Dark Lord has been giving her private lessons himself," Tavaris went on, after a moment, "but someone must review the material with her. She shows great promise, that one. Greater than her husband, I'd say."

He made a thoughtful noise.

"Now that I've spent some time in your presence, I really do believe that the two of you would've made good friends, had you accepted the Dark Lord's offer."

She choked on the sip of water she had just taken, eyes watering, and dropped her fork again to grab her napkin and press it against her mouth.

"Problem, Mione?"

Coughing into her napkin, she shook her head.

"Wrong pipe," she managed eventually, wheezing slightly. "I'll be fine."

"Where was I, then? Oh, yes, Severus and I spent most of the day in the library —"

"*What* library?"

Tavaris grinned smugly.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“As a matter of fact, I would,” said Hermione hoarsely. She took another sip of her water, sighing a little when it went down smoothly. “I’ve looked for it, but I can’t seem to find it anywhere.”

“How unfortunate.”

Snape gave another chuckle, and she glared at him.

“Now, on Monday morning, my presence is required at the Ministry,” said Tavaris. “I expect to be back near one o’clock, and shortly thereafter, the little Black and Bartemius Jr will be arriving. I trust that you’ll remain on your best behaviour in my absence?”

“Of course,” said Hermione tightly, setting down her cutlery. She watched as the two of them finished their meals, unable to stomach any more food herself. She wanted to leave, despite her initial motivations, but she didn’t want them to think they had scared her off.

So, she sat there and waited until they stood, and Dinky came to clear the table, then she, too, rose from her seat. As they returned to Tavaris’ study, she returned to her bedroom, and once there, she collapsed onto her bed and laid staring up at the canopy. The idea of attempting to read held little interest to her now, and exploring again, even less.

She kicked off her shoes, letting her bare feet dangle off the edge of the mattress.

Strangely, Hermione’s mind did not wander; it stayed right where it was, just as she did. There was a stillness in her head that she had never quite experienced before; any thoughts she had swiftly dwindled into nothingness, and she felt oddly bereft. Was this hopelessness? She did not think so, but she could not say for certain; hope was something she had never truly been without, for even in her darkest moments, there had always been hope.

Alas, there was no hope now, so perhaps that really was what she was feeling: the lack of it. Hope was for dreamers, and she could not dream if she already knew what would happen.

Her limbs felt heavy, yet her eyes were wide open, and she was not tired in the slightest. Her heart was not racing, and her breathing was normal; there was no panic nor fear. She did not know where that fear had gone, but she was certain that it had left due to the fact that she felt no need to keep her gaze trained on the door.

This feeling was not one that Hermione was familiar with, but she soon would be, for it would not be going away, not for a long while.

Her days began to blend. She tried to read and practise the piano, and sometimes it worked, however, other times, she could not find the motivation to give it a try in the first place. Even when she did, the strange feeling lingered.

She heard the voices of Regulus Black and Barty Crouch Jr from the floor below on Monday afternoon, as she laid on the blue sofa in the lady’s parlour, and even then, she could not

bring herself to move. The odd thing was that she wanted to; she wanted to see them, to learn more about them, especially Regulus, but still, she could not move.

Clearly, she did not want to do so badly enough.

Dinky brought Hermione her dinner, and she ate it mechanically, then laid back down and resumed staring at the ceiling. She did a lot of staring now, especially at clocks. There was something about watching the time tick by that never failed to capture her attention. It was as though each *tick* was a reminder to do nothing, and so let time carry on as it was supposed to.

She was out of the cellar, yet still waiting.

Waiting was a boring affair, even for those more patient than others, but what else was there to do? Sleeping helped; in sleep, she no longer had the urge to do anything else at all. The nights spent asleep were portions of time in which she could fast-forward, skipping the parts that she did not like; this way, she would not have to watch them, nor be aware of the entirety of what had happened.

The feeling bled into Hermione's memories, too. The longing to see her family again dulled slightly — or, rather, not the longing, but how this longing felt. There was no ache in her stomach when she thought of Rose and Hugo away at Hogwarts, or of Ron helping George create a new line of joke products for Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes.

She did not miss them any less than she had previously; however, she could no longer feel it. This fact caused her to panic, but somehow, she could not feel that either. The fear remained each time that she was given a Sleeping Draught, yet that feeling, too, was gone. She knew that it was there, and yet it was not.

This isn't hopelessness, she realised, perhaps later than she should have. *I know exactly what this is.*

But knowing did not help, not in this case.

Hermione finally felt fear again on the last Sunday of the month: the thirtieth of July. She was sitting in the conservatory, drinking a pot of tea and staring at the plants, her head propped up on her hand, when she heard an all too familiar cackle.

She stiffened, immediately on high alert. Even the fern in the corner seemed to bristle slightly — an odd reaction for a non-magical plant.

As if drawn by some invisible force, Hermione rose from her seat and moved steadily closer to the paned-glass doors, left partly open. She slipped through into the formal dining room, catching a glimpse of long, dark curls through the open crack between the next set of doors.

"— not exactly to your tastes, of course, but I thought you might like to see it, nonetheless," she heard Tavaris saying, amusement evident in his voice.

"No, not at all, Lord Nott," Bellatrix Lestrange replied, sounding equally amused, and shivers ran down Hermione's spine like a trickle of ice-cold water, "but I can admit to it being rather

interesting. Tell me, who thought up this curse? Was it you?"

"You think *I* would come up with something like this?" said Tavaris, scoffing. "Please, Bellatrix, you know me better than that."

There it was again: the cackle; it was less mad-sounding now than it had been the last time Hermione had heard it, but equally unsettling.

"I've always been a dab hand at Herbology but it's not an area on which I tend to focus. I, like you, prefer a little more excitement." Tavaris chuckled, adding, "But it is quite funny, is it not?"

"*Very*."

"Come, come — allow me to show you —"

Bellatrix turned then, meeting Hermione's gaze through the crack between the doors.

She was beautiful, hauntingly so. There wasn't a trace of the deranged look she had worn after her time in Azkaban, and in fact, she looked like the most exemplary pure-blood witch, much like Narcissa did; it was easier now, to see that they were sisters. Bellatrix's hair was still on the wilder side, but half-pinned back, contained; her dark, heavily-lidded eyes were concentrated rather than crazed, her smile sharp but not cruel; her makeup toed the line between refined and seductive; and she wore an indigo dress made of velvet.

As Hermione stood there, Bellatrix tilted her head in what seemed to be curiosity, her smile spreading.

"Is this the little wife I've heard so much about?" she asked Tavaris, without taking her eyes off Hermione. He made a confirmative noise. "I must say, she appears a little more timid than I had expected."

"She wasn't that way when she arrived," said Tavaris, "that's for certain. But she's a quick learner, that much is true."

"Is that right, Lady Nott?" said Bellatrix, gently pushing the doors open, widening the crack. "Have you come to learn your place?"

Hermione swallowed thickly, her hand twitching at her side, instinctively reaching for her wand. Smiling still, Bellatrix stepped into the dining room, Tavaris close behind her, and began to slowly circle Hermione, her eyes trailing over her rigid form, racked with tension.

"Tamed, I see," Bellatrix murmured. She sounded disappointed.

"I wouldn't say *that*," said Tavaris ruefully, tapping the floor with his walking-stick. "More so, biding her time. Isn't that right, Mione?"

Hermione said nothing. It was possible that she had stopped breathing; perhaps, she thought, her heart had crushed her lungs in its violent spasming.

“She’s smart; she knows when she ought to lie low … do as she’s told … but I am under no illusion that she will stay this way.”

Bellatrix reached out to twirl a strand of Hermione’s hair around one talon-nailed finger; Hermione flinched.

“Jumpy, are we?”

You’re dead, Hermione thought determinedly. *You’re dead, you’re dead, you’re dead.*

“How upsetting that she refused our Lord’s generous offer,” Bellatrix said, clicking her tongue. “From what I’ve heard, she would have made a most excellent …” she paused, considering, “*partner in crime* …”

You’re dead. I watched you die. Molly killed you.

“But I am sure she shall provide you with a strong heir,” she finished, with a rather abrupt change of tone, going from a velvety taunt to disinterested flatness. She let the strand of Hermione’s hair between her fingers fall and stepped back. “After all, what is more important than the continuation of our bloodlines?”

Your daughter will be a half-blood.

“Run along now, Lady Nott. We’ve things to do.”

It may have been cowardly, but sometimes cowardice was wise; bowing her head, Hermione hastened from the room. With quick steps, she made her way upstairs, into her bedroom, and shut the door behind her. She pressed her back against it, clutching her throat and struggling for breath. Squeezing her eyes shut, she willed herself to calm down.

She’s dead, she’s dead, she’s dead, she’s dead.

Only she wasn’t, not yet. The villain who had starred in Hermione’s nightmares for several years on end was very much alive, and she was just one floor away.

Hermione slid down to the floor, knees weak, and continued to claw at her neck, feeling as though she was being suffocated.

She’s dead, she’s dead, she’s dead.

Only she wasn’t, and that mad cackle echoed in her ears, surrounding her, drowning every one of her senses until it was the singular thing left in existence; a million knives pierced her skin and she sobbed; the floor of the drawing room was hard as she flailed, writhing in pain; and Ron shouted in the distance, “HERMIONE! HERMIONE!”

“I’m going to ask you again! Where did you get this sword? *Where*?”

“We found it — we found it — PLEASE!”

“You’re lying, filthy Mudblood, and I know it! You have been inside my vault at Gringotts! Tell the truth, *tell the truth*!”

Hermione screamed, the pain overwhelming, worse than anything she had ever felt in her life —

“HERMIONE!”

“What else did you take? What else have you got? Tell me the truth or, I swear, I shall run you through with this knife!”

Screaming was all she could do; she would surely die from this pain —

“What else did you take, what else? ANSWER ME! CRUCIO!”

“HERMIONE! HERMIONE!”

“How did you get into my vault?” Bellatrix screamed. “Did that dirty little goblin in the cellar help you?”

“We only met him tonight!” Hermione sobbed. “We’ve never been inside your vault … it isn’t the real sword! It’s a copy, just a copy!”

“A copy?” screeched Bellatrix. “Oh, a likely story!”

A small, boney hand grasped her jaw, and something cool was pressed to her lips.

“But we can find out easily!” said Lucius. “Draco, fetch the goblin, he can tell us whether the sword is real or not!”

“Stop squirming, Mistress! Stop squirming, Dinky says!”

Hermione choked and spluttered as her mouth was flooded with something watery, tinged with peppermint, sliding down her throat, the scene flashing before her eyes: Griphook shaking his head, Fenrir Greyback leering, and Bellatrix lifting her sleeve to touch her Dark Mark —

“— dispose of the Mudblood. Greyback, take her if you want her —”

And then the world tilted, darkening, before suddenly righting itself, and Hermione found herself on the floor of her bedroom at the Nott Estate with Dinky hovering over her, an empty vial in their hand.

“You is more trouble than you is worth, Mistress Mione,” Dinky told her, panting slightly.

That’s not really my problem, Hermione thought dazedly, drenched in cooling sweat. Her heart was steadily slowing, and her breath had begun to even out. *Calming Draught.*

It had been a long time since something like this had happened — decades, really. She had thought she had gotten over it. It was deeply disappointing to discover that she hadn’t.

With trembling arms, she forced herself to sit upright, and took several deep breaths.

“Thank you, Dinky,” she said after a minute, swallowing. Her throat was sore. “I — I don’t know what came over me.”

Dinky gave her a disbelieving look.

“Did they —” Hermione cleared her throat, “— did they hear me downstairs?”

“No, Master and Madam Lestrange being in the library now,” Dinky said. “Dinky hears, though; Dinky hears everything.”

“Right,” she said, nodding weakly. She staggered to her feet, catching herself with a hand on the wall, and made her way towards the ensuite. “Thank you, again, Dinky.”

“Mm-hmm. You be getting some rest now, Mistress Mione. No dinner tonight. Just rest.”

She gave them a shaky smile, then moved into the ensuite, where she went about stripping off her damp clothes and running herself a bath. Once submerged in the warm water, she rested her head against the rim of the tub, letting her eyes slip shut.

Disappointment was certainly the word for what she was feeling at that moment, but at least she was feeling. The Calming Draught had cleared her head, leaving behind a different sort of stillness: a peaceful quiet.

It caused her to lower her guard, unafraid as she sank deeper into the water, and deeper into her thoughts. The peaceful quiet, the calm, allowed her mind to wander without fear.

Hermione knew what it meant that she was here, and this time, she allowed herself to think it.

The boy with whom she had attended school for seven years, whom had been one of the many to look down on her for her parentage, and the man whom she had sentenced to Azkaban, whom, back in the future, sat in a cold, damp cell, surrounded by cloaked figures that sought only souls to feed on, was her son. The mother of Theodore Nott was, in reality, herself, and it had been so all along.

And therein lied the reason that Hermione had fought so hard to avoid thinking; there was only one thing she knew about the mother of Theodore Nott.

She died.

Chapter End Notes

I hope the way I described Hermione's depression made sense. I myself have Bipolar II Disorder (and an unfortunate number of other things that also end in, "Disorder," but that's not the point), and that's sort of what I feel during periods of depression.

Please don't be mad at me! This isn't ALL going to be totally depressing, I swear!

Dreams of Denial

Chapter Summary

> Maybe then I'll fade away and not have to face the facts
> It's not easy facing up when your whole world is black
> — Paint It, Black, The Rolling Stones

Chapter Notes

> If you haven't read or seen the Cursed Child, this chapter will probably be confusing, so comment any questions you have and I'll answer them. There will also be a few OCs to whom I shall lend further explanation in the End Notes.
>
> There are a few quotes in this chapter that were either directly taken (or somewhat paraphrased) from Ch.13, The Muggle-Born Registration Commission, of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, as well as Ch.12, Professor Umbridge, of Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, and Ch.16, Through the Trapdoor, of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone. All credits, obviously, go to JKR.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione reached up to flush the toilet, then resumed her position with her elbow resting on the seat and her hand propping up her head. She had almost forgotten how awful this stage was.

There were tiny, clumsy footsteps behind her, almost like the *pitter*, *patter* of a light rain. A small hand came to rest on her shoulder.

“Is you sick?”

“Just a little bit, darling,” Hermione said, turning her head to smile weakly at Rose. She raised her free hand to tuck a stray curl of red hair behind her ear, then stroked her freckled cheek. “I’ll be alright.”

“Rosie! Rosie, where’d you go?”

Hermione clicked her tongue, half-amused and half-reproving. “Did you run away from Daddy?”

Giggling, Rose nodded her head.

“Naughty girl. She’s in here, Ron!”

A few seconds later, Ron appeared in the doorway of the master bathroom, two purple hair ties in one hand and a sparkly hairbrush in the other.

“Rosie, sweetheart,” he said, “we’ve got to do your hair before you go to Granny’s.”

Rose ducked and crawled onto Hermione’s lap to hide.

“Daddy’s right. You were complaining about your hair getting in your face yesterday, remember? Daddy has to tie it back so that doesn’t happen again.”

“No!” said Rose. “I don’t wanna go.”

Hermione sighed, rubbing her face tiredly. She exchanged an exasperated look with Ron.

“Daddy and I have to go to work,” she told Rose gently. “You can’t stay here all by yourself.”

“But you is sick, Mummy,” said Rose pointedly. “You no go to work.”

“Oh, darling, no. Mummy’s still got to go to work.”

“But you is gonna get people sick!”

Ron entered the bathroom and lowered himself to sit beside them, setting down the brush and ties.

“C’mere, Rosie,” he said, spreading his arms. Rose crawled out from her hiding spot and onto his lap. He wrapped his arms around her. “Mummy can’t get anyone else sick. She’s a different sort of sick, see.”

Rose craned her neck to look up at him.

“Remember we told you how Mummy’s got another baby growing in her belly?”

She nodded.

“Well, Mummy’s sick because the baby is bouncing about in there right now,” Ron told her, “and it makes her belly hurt.”

“Bouncing about?” Hermione mouthed, raising an eyebrow.

He shrugged. Looking down at Rose, he continued.

“Mummy’s got to go to work, even though she doesn’t feel too good, because when the baby comes she’ll have to stay home for a bit to take care of them.”

Hermione felt another wave of nausea and sat up to retch in the toilet. When she sat back and flushed it again a minute later, Ron was gone, leaving only Rose on the white-tiled floor. But Rose was not two years old anymore: she was fourteen, her present-day self.

“Are you having another baby, Mum?” she asked quietly.

Hermione opened her mouth, but no words came out. She did not know what to say.

Rose picked the ties and hairbrush up off the floor and held them out to her, her blue eyes wide and glassy.

“Will you still have time to braid my hair once the baby comes?”

“*Of course,* darling,” said Hermione, taking the proffered ties and brush. She shifted over and gestured for Rose to turn, then went about braiding her hair. “I will always have time to braid your hair, don’t you worry.”

“You were lying when you told me that,” said Rose. “‘Just because I’m Minister now doesn’t mean I won’t have time for you,’ you said. Do you remember?”

Her words caused Hermione physical pain. She struggled to keep braiding.

“I tried my best,” she said.

“But are you trying your best now? Because you’re lying again, Mum.” Rose moved her head, throwing off Hermione’s hands, and looked back at her blankly. “You won’t have the time. You won’t even be here.”

“No. No, darling, that’s not true,” said Hermione resolutely, reaching for her.

Rose stood, moving further away. “Stop lying, Mum,” she said, and she disappeared out the door.

Hermione hastened after her, calling her name, but Rose did not turn back; she led her out of the master bedroom, into the hallway and down the stairs, moving almost robotically. She only came to a stop when she reached the backdoor; she opened it and stepped aside.

“You won’t be here, Mum,” Rose said, and she pointed out the door, “because that’s where you’ll be.”

Through the open doorway, rather than their quaint cobblestone backyard, Hermione saw the same cemetery that lurked behind the Nott Estate. She stumbled back, shaking her head.

“Don’t be stupid, Mum. You know this is what’s going to happen.”

“No, I — I can’t be certain,” she said. “She could’ve been presumed dead; she could’ve gone missing —”

“Why are you talking like she and you aren’t the same person?”

“I thought you read Theodore Nott’s file, Hermione?”

Hermione spun round.

Harry stepped closer to her, a thick file in his grasp.

“I did!”

“You skipped the bit about his parents, though,” Harry said, “didn’t you? Because you thought you already knew all you needed to know about them. Have you any idea what you’d have seen if you’d actually looked?”

He opened the file and held it up, pointing at the line just beneath, *Father, imprisoned D.E., Tavaris Nott*, where it read, *Mother, deceased, Mione Greenwood Nott.*

“No!” Hermione screamed, smacking the file out of his grasp; it fell to the floor, the pages spilling out. “We don’t know that! We don’t know if it’s true!”

“Look at this, then,” said Harry, pulling another file off his desk, and she realised that was where they were: his office at the Ministry; the Office of the Head of Magical Law Enforcement. “This is your file.”

“No, Harry.” Hermione backed away, her back hitting the Enchanted windows that displayed a sunny London skyline — a sight she missed dearly. “Harry, please.”

“This is who you are, Hermione.” Harry held up the file and, like Rose, his expression was blank. There was no emotion in his voice either. “Mione Greenwood, born on the nineteenth of September —” he stepped towards her, “— nineteen-fifty-nine. Daughter of Monica and Wendell Greenwood, pure-bloods who fled France together in order to get out from under the thumbs of their blood-supremacist parents.”

“Those are lies, *those are all lies*!” cried Hermione, and there were tears running down her face, only they were not tears at all; it had begun to rain in the office. She glanced around frantically, watching as the drops fell, slowly soaking the untidy stacks of paperwork that cluttered the desk.

Harry’s hair was sticking to his forehead, dripping, yet he did not react, still holding the file aloft.

“They were private researchers who worked for a nondescript potions’ company. You grew up surrounded by their work, taught magic from the time you were old enough to understand it. You attended a Muggle primary school and continued your education at the public secondary school by your house.”

He rounded his desk, his shoes making an unpleasant *squelching* noise each time they met the wet carpet.

“You dated a Muggle named Bilius Williamson and visited his family’s cottage, where you got to know his siblings, Rose and Hugo. He gave you a promise ring that you wore on a chain round your neck.”

The rain came down harder, drenching Hermione’s clothes. She shielded her eyes with her hand, blinking rapidly.

“I requested somebody from Magical Maintenance to sort out my office, Cattermole,” came a deep, cold voice, and she looked to her right; embedded in the wall of Harry’s office was a golden lift in which stood Corban Yaxley, with Reginald Cattermole, Mafalda Hopkirk, and Albert Runcorn. “It’s still raining in there.”

“Raining … in your office? That’s — that’s not good, is it?” Reginald gave a nervous laugh.

“You think it’s funny, Cattermole, do you?”

“No, no, of course —”

“You realise that I am on my way downstairs to interrogate your wife, Cattermole?” said Yaxley. “In fact, I’m quite surprised you’re not down there holding her hand while she waits. Already given her up as a bad job, have you? Probably wise. Be sure to marry a pure-blood next time.”

“Mary,” Hermione breathed in horror. She patted herself down, searching for her wand, but it was not there. “No, no … no, please —”

“On the evening of the first of November, nineteen-seventy-seven,” Harry continued, now directly in front of her, “your house was the victim of Fiendfyre, believed to be cast by the families of your parents, who’d finally found out where you were hiding. Inside the house were Monica, Wendell, and Bilius. All three of them were burned alive.”

“But if *my* wife were accused of being a Mudblood — not that any woman I married would ever be mistaken for such filth — and the Head of Magical Law Enforcement needed a job doing, I would make it my priority to do that job, Cattermole. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” Reginald whispered.

“Then attend to it, Cattermole, and if my office is not completely dry within an hour your wife’s Blood Status will be in even graver doubt than it is now.”

The lights went out in the office and the view of the sunny London skyline turned dark, lightning flashing wildly in the distance. Thunder rumbled and shook the room; Hermione grasped the chair behind Harry’s desk to keep herself upright, but no one else seemed at all affected.

“— but how do I stop it raining?”

“Try *Finite Incantatem*,” Mafalda said at once, “that should stop the rain if it’s a hex or a curse; if it doesn’t, something’s gone wrong with an Atmospheric Charm, which will be more difficult to fix, so as an interim measure try *Impervius* to protect his belongings —”

“*Finite Incantatem*,” Hermione repeated, looking at Harry. “Get out your wand, *Finite Incantatem*, try it —”

“You then attended Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, with nowhere else to go,” Harry said, as though she had not spoken, his voice growing louder to be heard over the rain. “You met my parents there. You met Sirius and Remus —”

“Stop it, Harry!” said Hermione. “Get out your wand!”

Suddenly, Harry shortened, his hair turned red, his robes shrank, his glasses slid off his nose and fell to the floor, he dropped the file, and then Ron stood there, twelve years old.

“HAVE YOU GONE MAD?” he bellowed. “ARE YOU A WITCH OR NOT?”

“I can’t — I can’t — I haven’t got my wand!”

“Quickly, Hermione!” said Runcorn urgently, beckoning her over to the lift, where only he and Mafalda remained. “Come with us!”

Without a second thought, Hermione darted into the lift and the golden grilles slammed shut behind her. The lift shot upwards, Harry’s office vanishing from sight. When it stopped again, a disembodied voice said, “Level One, Minister for Magic and Support Staff.”

The grilles slid open and both Hermione and Mafalda gasped. Before them stood a squat witch with a toad-like face. She wore a velvet bow in her hair and was clutching a clipboard to her chest.

“Ah, Mafalda!” said Dolores Umbridge. “Travers sent you, did he?”

“Y—yes,” squeaked Mafalda.

“Good, you’ll do perfectly well.” Umbridge consulted her clipboard. “Ten people today and one of them the wife of a Ministry employee! Tut, tut … even here, in the heart of the Ministry!” She stepped in between Hermione and Mafalda and glanced sideways at Runcorn. “Good morning, Albert, aren’t you getting out?”

“Yes, of course,” said Runcorn, and he exited the lift, the grilles sliding shut with a *clang*.

Umbridge looked at Hermione next, her eyes narrowing.

“What are you doing here, Lady Nott?” she asked suspiciously. “I thought you were dead.”

“I’m not dead,” said Hermione, “and I’m not Lady Nott, either.”

“Don’t be silly, Lady Nott,” said Umbridge, with a girlish giggle. “You died years ago, haven’t you read your file?”

Hermione shook her head.

Umbridge snapped her fingers at Mafalda. “Mafalda, the file, if you please.”

Mafalda pulled a file out of thin air and handed it to her; Umbridge handed it to Hermione.

“I won’t read it,” she told Umbridge, setting her jaw.

“But then how will you learn?” Umbridge giggled again. “If you do not study the theory, how will you accomplish it in practice?”

“I’m not going to die,” said Hermione angrily.

Mafalda shook her head with a sigh.

“Now, let me make this quite plain.” Umbridge turned and jabbed one stubby finger in Hermione’s face. “You have been under the belief that you will manage to survive until you can return to the future —”

“I will!” snapped Hermione.

“Lady-Nott-you-are-already-acting-like-a-fool-do-not-make-matters-worse-for-yourself,” said Umbridge in a single breath. “As I was saying, you have been under the belief that you will survive this. *This is a lie*.”

“It is NOT a lie!”

“The file, Lady Nott! You must read it. I repeat, *this is a lie*. The Ministry of Magic guarantees that you are going to die. If you still believe you won’t, by all means, come and see me after we are through with today’s interrogations.” She put on a fake smile. “I am here to help. I am your friend. And now, you will kindly begin reading. Page five, ‘Cause of Death.’”

Hermione threw the file on the ground, fuming.

“Hermione, no!” Mafalda whispered in a warning voice, reaching around Umbridge to tug on her sleeve, but Hermione jerked her arm away, just as the golden grilles slid open once more.

“So, according to you, I’ll be murdered, is that it?” Hermione’s voice was shaking. “Or will I die in childbirth? Slip in the bath and hit my head?”

There was a collective intake of breath from the witches and wizards standing outside the lift. They stared avidly from Hermione to Umbridge, whose fake smile was gone.

“You will only know if you read the file,” she said coldly. “It even has your name on it, see —” She pointed to the file on the floor, on the cover of which was printed, *NOTT, MIONE.*

“That’s not my name,” said Hermione.

“It’s not?” Umbridge made a *hmph* sound. “In that case, you, too, must be interrogated.”

The crowd outside the lift promptly flooded in, each of them grabbing whatever part of Hermione they could reach. She struggled and fought, but without a wand, there was nothing she could do; they collectively dragged her down the tiled corridor while Umbridge and Mafalda trotted along after them. Hermione was forced through the courtroom doors and shoved into the seat in the very middle of it; thick chains sprouted from the arms and legs of the chair, locking her in place.

In the gallery, the full Wizengamot had gathered. Their faces blurred together, none of them identifiable. Umbridge hopped up onto the highest point of the raised platform, the spot in

which Hermione herself had once sat as Minister for Magic. Umbridge banged the gavel, calling for order, and the crowd dispersed.

“You are not Mione Nott, formerly Greenwood?” she asked.

Hermione gave a single, shaky nod.

“Not married to Tavaris Nott of the Wizengamot, nor the mother of Theodore Nott?”

“No, I am not.”

“Then who are you?”

She shook her head, refusing to answer.

“Do you even know?” asked Umbridge.

“Of course, I do!”

“Then prove it.”

“She attended Hogwarts in the school year of nineteen-seventy-seven to nineteen-seventy-eight, following the death of her parents,” Mafalda said, a thick stack of papers before her. Beside her, Percy Weasley was scribbling furiously. “After which point, she was captured and brought to Malfoy Manor by two Death Eaters who had been attending their sons’ graduation ceremony. She was then forced to marry Tavaris Nott at wandpoint and transferred to the Nott Estate, where she remained until her death.”

“Is this true?”

“Yes, but —”

“You must not tell lies!” hissed Umbridge. “Didn’t Mr Potter tell you that? The truth now, whoever you are.”

Hermione burst into tears, shaking her head again.

“In November of nineteen-seventy-nine, she gave birth to Theodore Nott,” Mafalda read on. She looked up at Hermione. “Is that correct?”

“I don’t know — I don’t know!”

“But you do,” said someone softly, their voice laden with grief. Hermione peered down at her feet where there sat a thin man with brown hair, slightly curled, deep-blue eyes, and a nose identical to her own. “You do know, Mum.”

Her breath left her, and she stared.

“Are you ashamed of me?” Theodore asked. “Is that why you won’t tell the truth? You hate me, don’t you? Because if it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t be here.”

“I don’t … I don’t hate you,” whispered Hermione.

“You put me in Azkaban, Mum,” said Theodore sadly. He pointed to the gavel in Umbridge’s hand. “You banged that gavel right there and sentenced me to four years in prison.” He looked back at her. “It’s cold there, Mum. The Dementors make me feel as if I’ll never be happy again.”

“I didn’t know,” said Hermione, in a weak defence, “I didn’t know you were my son.”

“I have a daughter,” Theodore told her, “and you knew that when you sent me away. She’s the same age as your niece Molly … remember? They never got on. You used to listen to Molly complain about my daughter at family gatherings. She hated my daughter — her best friend, too. Don’t you remember?”

“I swear they cheated, Aunt Hermione.”

Hermione tore her eyes away from Theodore; where Percy had previously resided was now his eldest daughter, Molly Weasley II. She was cutting up her roast beef, the plate on the little desk before her full of what Hermione instinctively knew was Granny Weasley’s cooking.

“They’re Slytherins,” Molly said, very matter-of-factly, “it’s what they do. I spent weeks studying for that exam. Fred and Dominique kept giving me grief for never leaving the library. But Nott and Adley still outdid me.” She took a bite of her roast beef and chewed, swallowing. “Helena Nott is the granddaughter of a Death Eater in the Inner Circle, it’s obvious that lying and plotting come naturally to her, and Arron Adley — you’ve heard of his sister from Rose, I’m sure — he’s an utter prat, pardon my rudeness. I simply cannot believe he and Nott were made prefects. Really, Aunt Hermione, what had Professor McGonagall been thinking? She must be getting old.”

“Do you remember what you said when she told you this?” Theodore asked Hermione. “You said, ‘Well, this Helena Nott is the daughter of Pansy Parkinson, so I can’t say I’m surprised.’ And then you said, ‘Nor am I surprised about the Adley boy. Have I told you about his father?’ I’m embarrassed for you, Mum. I thought you were supposed to be unprejudiced.”

“I am *not* prejudiced!” said Hermione hotly.

“Then why did you say that?”

She huffed, her anger building.

“Because Pansy Parkinson spent years trying to make me miserable. She was a bully.”

“She’s my wife,” said Theodore coolly. “Your daughter-in-law.”

Hermione scoffed. “Pansy Parkinson is most certainly not nor will she ever be my family.”

“She is, though. So is Helena but you still let your niece speak poorly of her. You even agreed.”

“And you say *I* am prejudiced,” said a new voice, and her eyes found a tall man with blond hair and blunt features, sitting only a metre away at a desk that had not been there a moment ago. On the desk was a silver name plate, which read: *Atlas C. Adley, Head of the Improper Use of Magic Office.*

“That’s because you are, Atlas,” she said, rolling her eyes, instantly annoyed. “If you weren’t, you wouldn’t feel the need to file a complaint every time a new piece of legislature to benefit S.P.E.W. is passed.”

“You have no right to take away my elf!” said Atlas Adley spitefully. “You sent him on strike the day of my daughter’s birthday party! He barely had the time to finish her cake!”

“He would not have been sent on strike if you hadn’t refused to give him the additional sick day, Atlas. And you could have just as easily baked the cake yourself.”

“Myself? That is servant work, Minister. My family was forced to eat out every night because of you and your pathetic love for lesser beings.”

“Why haven’t you fired him yet, Aunt Hermione?” asked Molly, nonplussed, waving her fork around. “The Ministry oughtn’t have people like him employed anymore.”

“I would if I could.” Hermione shot Atlas a glare. “I just need to find a solid enough reason first. We started in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement together — that’s decades I’ve spent working with him and I still haven’t found sufficient evidence for his termination. He’s good at what he does, believe it or not.”

“That, I am, Hermione,” said Atlas smugly.

“It’s Minister to you.”

“It shouldn’t be. The Minister for Magic is meant to be unprejudiced, no? Yet here we are.” His expression turned cold. “My daughter showed up at the Ministry the morning after you sent our elf away, begging you to let her see him. She was sick, so sick that you and Ethel nearly sent her to St Mungo’s … but you *didn’t*. Instead, you called *me*, because you thought it more likely that she was just a spoiled little girl throwing a tantrum. Why is that, *Minister*?”

Hermione squirmed uncomfortably.

“Because she’s your daughter,” she admitted, feeling her face heat, “and because Rose told me that she was just as prejudiced as you are.”

“And what, may I ask, made you finally feel sorry for her? What made you finally see my daughter as her own person, not merely an extension of myself?”

A boy, only fourteen years old, walked into view, dragging a chair behind him; it scraped eerily against the floor. He placed the chair next to Atlas’ desk and sat down, his hands folded in his lap.

“My death,” he said.

Theodore spoke up.

“The first of my Time-Turners — the prototype that Potter took when he raided my house — *your* house — that *your* nephew stole from *your* office — caused that boy’s death.” He hung his head. “No matter what the public believes, that wasn’t my fault … but you could’ve stopped it. You could’ve hidden the Time-Turner better or realised what Albus and Scorpius Malfoy were up to.” He met Hermione’s gaze. “I thought you were supposed to be the brightest witch of your age.”

Umbridge scoffed in disbelief.

“Albus and Scorpius meddled with time,” said the boy. “They snuck into your office with the daughter of Voldemort and Bellatrix Lestrange, fooled into thinking she was somebody else, and stole the Time-Turner from your Enchanted bookcase. They were both missing for days, and you couldn’t find them. If you had — if you had succeeded in stopping them and her — I would still be alive.” He stared at Hermione, distraught. “Do you even know my name?”

“Craig Bowker Jr,” she said at once. “You were killed by Delphini Riddle when you tried to help Albus and Scorpius.”

“What else do you know about me?” asked Craig. “Have you read my file?”

“Yes,” said Hermione, nodding vigorously, “yes, I did, you were in Slytherin with Albus. Your father — he’s a Healer. Your mother studies potions. You have a little sister.” She licked her lips, the taste slightly salty from her tears. “Your body was found on the Quidditch pitch.”

“By whom?” pressed Atlas.

“Your daughter,” she breathed, closing her eyes. “She was his best friend.”

“And you, *Minister*, are so prejudiced that it took my daughter’s best friend — her *only* friend — *dying* to finally see her as her own person.”

“So prejudiced that you deny your own son,” said Theodore, in a voice that wavered, and Hermione opened her eyes. He drew his legs towards himself and hugged them to his chest, making himself small. “You love your other children, but not me. What’s wrong with me that you don’t love me, Mum?”

“I — I haven’t even —” Hermione whimpered. “You’re not my son yet.”

“But I will be, and soon. Will you love me, then? Will you love me as much as you love them?” Theodore nodded to the gallery; in the first row sat Rose and Hugo, watching her intently. Like Rose, Hugo’s hair was a flaming red, but much less curly. His eyes were the same shade of blue as Ron’s, but his nose was identical to Hermione’s, identical to her father’s.

Identical to Theodore’s.

“Fourteen and twelve, and they’ll never see their mother again. They’ll just have their father, and you’ll just have me. So … will you love me the same?”

Hermione did not know what to say.

“No more lies,” said Umbridge sharply. “It’s time to tell the truth. Who are you?”

“Minister for Magic?” asked Molly.

“Prejudiced?” asked Atlas.

“The brightest witch of her age?” asked Craig.

“My mother?” asked Theodore.

“Ours?” asked Rose and Hugo together.

Atlas rose from his seat, grabbing a file from atop his desk, and strode towards Hermione. He dropped it in her lap, and she looked up at him, breathing heavily.

“Read it,” he said, “and find out.”

The chains restraining her withdrew, slithering back into the arms and legs of the chair. Trembling, she picked up the file; the label, *NOTT, MIONE*, stared back at her, taunting.

“Go on,” said Atlas encouragingly. “What are you waiting for?”

“Aren’t Gryffindors supposed to be brave?” said Theodore. “Stop running, Mum. Be a Gryffindor. Face the truth.”

“It’ll be OK, Mum,” said Hugo gently, as Rose wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “All you’ve got to do is be brave.”

“You can’t go on like this, Mum,” said Rose morosely. “You’ve got to know what’s going to happen to you. You’ve got to.”

Hermione began to cry again. She gripped the file tightly, her eyes darting from face to face, every one of them turned to her, watching and waiting.

“*I don’t want to die*,” she whispered, in a broken voice.

“It’s not as bad as it seems,” Craig told her. “Not for you, at least. Everyone else — the people you leave behind — that’s a whole other story … but you’ll be fine. You won’t be anything at all.”

“Good riddance,” declared Umbridge, and Molly glared at her, brandishing her fork threateningly; Umbridge gasped, appalled. “This is a courtroom, you animal, you cannot *eat* in here!”

“I can do anything I want!” said Molly. “I’m a prefect!”

Narcissa Malfoy appeared behind them, looking as poised as ever. She placed a hand on Molly’s shoulder.

“Settle down now, all of you,” Narcissa said, in an authoritative voice. She gazed down at Hermione, her expression one of utter indifference. “She will not die.”

Rose snorted, shooting Hermione a sardonic look.

“You really trust *her* of all people to tell the truth about whether somebody is dead or not?”

Laughter erupted from the back row of the gallery; Hermione saw Teddy Lupin, James Sirius Potter, and Fred Weasley II lounging in the seats there.

“Good one, Rose,” sniggered James. “C’mon, Aunt Hermione, don’t be daft. Open the file.”

“I promise that it won’t explode on you,” Fred said, in mock seriousness, and he and James abruptly burst into laughter again, repeatedly elbowing each other in the ribs for no apparent reason other than their inability to contain themselves.

Teddy rose from his seat, his hair shifting from turquoise to sandy-blond, the same shade as his father’s. He slowly but confidently made his way down from the platform, speaking as he descended.

“Think of it this way, Hermione: if you die, you’ll never have to tell Ron about fancying my dad. Even if it was just a little bit, it still doesn’t look too good, does it? The handholding … the kisses on the cheek … the cuddling … you really toed the line there, didn’t you?”

Hermione’s stomach twisted; she felt as though she may be sick.

“Yeah, that look on your face — that’s guilt,” said Teddy, on the main level now. He slipped his hands into the back pockets of his jeans, looking at her calmly. “You feel guilty because you are guilty. Sure, you didn’t really act on it, and yeah, you told my dad it wasn’t going to happen, but still … you fucked up, Hermione.”

“Teddy —”

“Now, I’ll be fair,” he continued, cutting her off, “you needed him. You were homesick and he made you feel less alone. You clung to him because you’d spent years clinging to Ron and you didn’t know what to do with yourself without him there. But that doesn’t make it right and you know it.”

“*I do*,” Hermione told him emphatically. “That’s why I — I mean, I — I’m sorry, all right? I made a mistake and when I see Ron again, I will tell him *precisely* what happened.”

“But you won’t see Ron again, will you? You’ll be dead.” Teddy gave her a grim smile. “Calm yourself, Hermione, he won’t have to know.”

“He *deserves* to know.”

“So? Who’ll be there to tell him? Who *would* tell him, when he’s busy mourning his wife? You know,” Teddy added thoughtfully, “I wonder how long it’ll take for them to realise you’re even dead.”

“Yeah, who’ll be there to tell us?” James piped up. “I suppose it’ll be in the papers, yeah? *Minister for Magic Lost in Time.* How long’ll it take for them to sort it out, d’you reckon?”

“Long time,” said Fred gravely.

“You’ll just be … gone. *Poof*.” James shrugged one shoulder. “Well, you should know that you were always my favourite aunt.”

Fred snorted in amused scepticism.

“All right, all right,” said James grudgingly, “so maybe it’s Aunt Angelina, but who can blame me? She’s easily the coolest, after Mum.”

“We’ll still miss you, though,” Fred told Hermione. “Who else’ll be there to get us out of trouble? If it weren’t for you, James might’ve been suspended from school back when he broke the International Statute of Secrecy and the —”

“— Totally Unreasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery,” finished James. He elbowed Fred again and pointed across the courtroom at Atlas. “He wanted to send me to trial for that, you know.”

“What? All you did was freak out a few Muggles.”

“He terrified an entire street of them,” said Teddy reprovingly. “They had to close off the whole block while the Obliviators cleaned up his mess. There was a bunch of kids having a water fight,” he added to Theodore, “and James turned the water into grape juice so they’d all think it was blood.”

Theodore snickered.

“I never realised how alike you and your grandfather were until recently,” Hermione told James, who grinned unabashedly.

“OK, enough,” said Teddy, removing his hands from his pockets and holding them up, signalling for silence. “Quit stalling, Hermione. We’re on a bit of a tight schedule here.”

Theodore’s expression turned solemn.

“He’s right, Mum. You’re running out of time. You need to read the file.”

“For Merlin’s sake, we haven’t got all day!” said James.

A large hand landed on Hermione’s shoulder. She glanced up; Ron was gazing down at her warmly, comfort soon seeping into her from his touch.

“Go on, Mione,” he said, in a soft voice. “You have to know.”

“I miss you,” she told him.

“I know, love,” said Ron. “But it’s time. Open the file.”

She took a deep breath, and opened the file —

Hermione bolted upright in bed, gasping. She was covered in a thin layer of sweat, her bare skin slick against the silk sheets, and her heart was hammering.

An unfortunate side-effect of Sleeping Draughts was that they did not stop one from dreaming; they were drunk to keep her from seeing one thing, only to force her to see another.

Chapter End Notes

The Adley family is one I created a long time ago and threw in here to add more detail to Hermione's life in the future. Not much is known from those nineteen years before the epilogue, or even after it, for that matter. Who does she work with? Who are her children friends with? Where does she live? I've done a bit of world-building to fill in some of those gaps.

So, here are the OCs: Atlas Adley, the father, is Head of the Improper Use of Magic Office and Hermione's competitor at the Ministry who she constantly bumps heads with, due to the fact that he's an absolute ponce and (somewhat) quietly bigoted; Arron Adley, the son, is the nemesis/academic competitor of Molly Weasley II and the best friend of Helena Nott, daughter of Theo and Pansy, who is another nemesis of Molly's; Anna Adley, the daughter, is Rose's schoolyard enemy and the best friend of Craig Bowker Jr, who was the boy who died in the Cursed Child.

This family (as well as Helena Nott) is actually from a story of Albus Potter's perspective of the next generation at Hogwarts that I've been working on for quite a few years now (and is still not even close to being finished — it's my baby, I won't let it go until it's perfect) and, believe me when I tell you, Hermione is well in her right to dislike them — they actually are rather terrible.

Dinner for Twenty

Chapter Summary

I'm on display for all you fuckers to see
Show and tell
Harsh words if you don't get a pic with me
Buy and sell (buy and sell me, baby)
Like I'm a product to society
Art don't sell
Unless you've fucked every authority
— Show & Tell, Melanie Martinez

Chapter Notes

I did drunk Marauders, now it's time for drunk pure-bloods. Well, you know, the blood-supremacist ones.

The character development begins now, so for those of you annoyed with Hermione, don't worry; it's personal growth time. I find that character development/growth is one of my favourite things to write, and there can be none of that if the character in question is without flaws, hence why I've so far written her the way that I have.

Also: new character alert, at the very end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The summer passed with surprising speed. Hermione saw no more of Tavaris' "students," nor did she see Abraxas Malfoy and Edmund Lestrange. She made herself scarce whenever there was company, avoiding a potential repeat of what had happened during Bellatrix's visit.

Hermione did, however, make note of whoever was there, as well as which rooms they spent time in and whether they stayed for dinner or not. She wrote it all down on a piece of parchment that she kept in the top-left drawer of the desk in her bedroom.

Saturday afternoons, biweekly: Severus Snape. Study (& library?). Stays for dinner, leaves by eight.

Sunday afternoons, monthly (last Sunday of the month): Bellatrix Lestrange. Grounds, study (& library?). Leaves by six.

Monday afternoons, weekly: Regulus Black and Barty Crouch Jr. Grounds, study (& library?). Leaves by five.

Wednesday afternoons, triweekly: Rabastan Lestrange, Gaspar Avery, Angus Mulciber and Evan Rosier. Grounds, study (& library?). Stays for dinner, leaves by nine.

Thursday nights: Abraxas Malfoy, Edmund Lestrange and (occasionally) Cygnus Black. Sitting room, study. Arrives by 8, leaves by 2.

She wanted to make note of whenever Tavaris was out of the house, too, whether this meant he was at a Death Eater meeting, at the Ministry of Magic, or elsewhere, but those times were sporadic; she could not track them. Dinky would inform her each time he left, but it was nearly always last-minute. His leaving also didn't mean much. It was true that she felt safer without him there, but it didn't make a difference in her behaviour; she kept to the same rooms, did the same things and, for the most part, experienced the same moods, or lack thereof.

The pair of them did not speak much to each other, anyway. Unless there was company or Hermione was practising the piano, the estate was silent; it was almost eerie. In early August, Hermione began spending more time in the lady's parlour so that she could listen to music on the gramophone, because the silence had grown suffocating. There was no Muggle music to be played, obviously, but she made do. What she really wanted to listen to was ABBA, which was most definitely Lily's influence; Hermione knew that listening to it would make her feel something, be it good or bad.

The soundtrack from the film *The Sound of Music* would have worked just as well, but this, too, was not an option. It had been her grandmother's favourite film, and for many reasons, although her grandfather had thought there had been just the one, and would say, "If your nan ever did happen to spot Christopher Plummer picking up a spot of something at the grocers, I fear I'd find myself quite out of a wife." Hermione had been ten years old when her grandmother had passed away, and she had spent the entire day watching the film, repeatedly ejecting the tape from the VHS player to shove it back in so she wouldn't be made to wait twenty minutes for it to rewind, until her father had to finally drag her away from the television.

She had made sure that Rose and Hugo had watched it. A family tradition, one might call it, although she doubted they had watched it frequently enough to earn that title. Nevertheless, it had been important to her that any child she had would see the film. Sometimes, when Rose and Hugo had still been little, Hermione had sung them to sleep with *My Favourite Things*, just like her grandmother had once done for her.

Now, Hermione sang it to herself, quietly, at times in which she woke from a nightmare. She would sit in bed, working to regulate her breathing, then go into the ensuite, draw herself a bath, and sing as she bathed.

"*Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens*

Bright copper kettles and warm woollen mittens

Brown paper packages tied up with strings

These are a few of my favourite things…"

She wondered if she would sing this song to Theodore one day, then wondered if she even wanted to.

He visited her in her dreams more often than not, always his present-day self and always asking the same questions.

"Are you ashamed of me?"

"You hate me, don't you?"

"What's wrong with me that you don't love me, Mum?"

These questions haunted her. As did the fact that she did not know the answers to them. She liked answers — needed answers — and she felt helpless without them.

One night in mid-August, Hermione dreamt of Christmas at the Burrow, except Theodore was there, with his wife and daughter. His daughter's face was blurred, because Hermione could not recall what Helena Nott looked like, but the face of Pansy Parkinson was burned into her eyelids when she woke, leaving her blinking rapidly in an attempt to free herself of it.

It was strange and altogether unpleasant to think about Pansy Parkinson being her daughter-in-law. Less unpleasant was knowing that she had a granddaughter, although it was still very strange. Hermione had not expected to have grandchildren for quite a long time. Then again, nor had she expected to have a child born the same year as herself.

November, she recalled from the portion of Theodore's file she had reviewed; he had been born in November of 1979. She could not remember the exact day; however, she knew enough to know that she would likely fall pregnant some time in February. She was not looking forward to it for two reasons: her worry that she would be unable to love him as a mother should, and her knowledge that, once he was born, she could die at any moment.

The possibility that she had merely gone missing and later been presumed dead was what kept Hermione going. She knew from her time in Magical Law Enforcement that a missing person was officially declared dead if a year had passed without any proof of life. If she were to make it to the Department of Mysteries, then return to the future, there would be no evidence that she was alive; everyone would believe her dead.

The problem was that Hermione did not know how she would make it to the Department of Mysteries in the first place.

Sometimes, she wondered if this was what Harry had felt like, back when they had been on the run, knowing there was a very good chance that he would not survive to see the end of the war. These thoughts would leave her in an existential crisis for days on end. She would find herself wondering whether her life had meaning or not, whether she had made a big enough impact, while she had still had the chance.

By the end of August, she had gotten the idea to list all her biggest accomplishments at least once a day, which helped a great deal.

- *Aiding Harry in Voldemort's defeat.*
- *Ensuring Harry lived until said defeat.*
- *The overturning of all anti-werewolf legislation put forth by Dolores Umbridge.*
- *Ministry-funded Wolfsbane.*
- *Eliminating the right to deny a person work due to their blood or creature status.*
- *Eliminating the Hogwarts Board of Governors' right to expel a student or terminate a member of staff for having creature blood.*
- *The right to suspend or fire an employee for the repeated use of the word, 'Mudblood.'*
- *Wages and time off for all house-elves.*
- *A centaur's right to defend their land.*
- *A mermaid/merman's right to defend their territory.*
- *Better living conditions in Azkaban Prison.*
- *Two beautiful and intelligent children.*
- *Head of Magical Law Enforcement.*
- *Minister for Magic.*

These were the accomplishments of which she was most proud, and to remind herself of them helped her feel less insignificant; a feeling that came hand in hand with helplessness. Of course, she could not actually write these things down, so she listed them in her head.

She longed for someone to talk to.

Soon enough, it was nearly September, and all those aged from eleven to seventeen would soon be headed to Hogwarts. Hermione wished she, too, were going, but she knew that this was where she was supposed to be, so she did not complain, not even in her head.

What she did do, however, on the twenty-ninth of the month, was complain to her reflection in the ensuite mirror.

"How on earth does he expect me to *sit there* and listen to them all spew *absolute rubbish* about blood purity and how *disgusting* half-breeds are?"

"Think about how *I* feel," her reflection replied reproachfully.

"A little bit of empathy wouldn't be lost on you, you know."

“That’s not really my problem, now, is it?”

With a huff, Hermione left the ensuite, her midnight-blue evening gown swishing around her ankles and her heels *clicking* against the floor. It was Tavaris’ fifty-first birthday, and the Nott Estate was playing host to all his closest friends: pure-blood snobs, their offspring, Death Eaters, and even Voldemort had promised to make an appearance. This meant that Hermione had to be on her “very best behaviour, do you understand?” or else she would be spending the following week in the cellar.

The estate had been cleaned to perfection, the sleek, black sitting-room gramophone had been moved to the formal dining room, the table in which had been set for twenty, and Goppy the house-elf had arrived from the other Nott property to assist Dinky in waiting on them all.

It was precisely half-past seven o’clock and Hermione was due in the front hall to join Tavaris in greeting his guests; she refused to call them “their” guests because if she had it her way, none of them would have been invited — except, perhaps, for Regulus. Unfortunately, his mother was also on the guestlist, and Walburga Black was one person whom Hermione had never wished to encounter outside of their portrait.

She slipped out into the hall and made her way downstairs where Tavaris waited. He was in fine black dress robes with silver embroidery on the cuffs and lapels, a waistcoat with silver pinstripes peeking out from beneath, and the wood of his walking-stick had been polished to shine in the dim lighting. He gave her a onceover as she came up beside him, then nodded in approval, which made her roll her eyes. He clicked his tongue at her.

“There will be no attitude tonight, Mione,” he said. “Some of our guests will find it incredibly off-putting.”

“Do I have permission to at least be silently bitter?” Hermione asked.

Tavaris opened his mouth, then shut it, appearing thoughtful. After a few seconds, he shrugged and said, “Why not? Most wives are, anyway.”

There was a firm *rapping* on the front doors. He shot her a warning look before signalling for Dinky to open them and greeting the Malfoys, all four of whom were dressed — to absolutely no surprise whatsoever — lavishly. Tavaris permitted Abraxas to clap him on the back, then gave Abraxas’ wife, whose name Hermione had been told was Evangeline, a peck on the cheek; he squeezed Lucius’ shoulder and kissed Narcissa’s knuckles. Hermione, meanwhile, stood still with her hands clasped in front of her as she was surveyed shrewdly, earning both faintly impressed looks and a single amused chuckle from Abraxas.

The four Malfoys carried on into the sitting room for pre-dinner drinks, just as the Avery and Mulciber families arrived: Avery Sr, whom she quickly discovered was called Elias, his son, Gaspar, and his wife (“Esther,” Tavaris had told her earlier; “keep an eye on her, she’s been known to have sticky fingers.”) and Mulciber Sr, really called Geoffrey, and Jr, Angus. This group, too, made their way into the sitting room.

The first of the Blacks arrived next: Cygnus and Druella, the parents of Bellatrix, Andromeda, and Narcissa. Within a minute of meeting them, Hermione concluded that

Cygnus' favourite expression was one of polite yet condescending amusement and that Druella had likely been the sort of mother to not let any of her daughters step foot outside the house with a single hair out of place.

It was just as the two of them were walking away that Hermione heard a voice that made her instinctively feel for her missing wand in order to silence a portrait that was not there.

"Straighten up, I say! Do you wish to become a hunchback, Regulus? No? Then straighten up!"

"Yes, Mother," Regulus said automatically, raising his chin as he stepped inside after his father. Walburga huffed, smoothed out her high-necked robes, which bore a black lace collar, and followed him. She was nearly identical to the portrait that she would one day have in Number 12 Grimmauld Place, the only difference being a few less wrinkles. Orion Black, however, Hermione had never seen before; he looked a great deal like Sirius, if Sirius had walked around with his wand up his own — pardon her language — arse.

"Tavaris, good to see you," Orion said in a monotone voice, clasping Tavaris' hand briefly. "Wards keeping up?"

"I believe so, yes," Tavaris said, and he glanced down at Hermione, adding, "what say you, Mione?"

"They put the wards at Azkaban to shame," she said in complete honesty, to which Tavaris laughed and Orion cracked a small smile.

"An appalling error on Crouch's part," the latter said.

Walburga treaded covertly on her son's foot; Regulus winced, then cleared his throat and stepped up to clasp Tavaris' hand in the same manner that his father had.

"Aunt Walburga, I had not been informed to expect you here tonight!" Bellatrix hurried up to the front doors to embrace Walburga, leaving a group of four others to trail in behind her; it was a very good thing that Hermione had requested a vial of the Draught of Peace from Dinky a half hour earlier.

With a gasp of delight, Bellatrix stole away to pinch Regulus' cheeks, muttering about how fetching he looked in his new dress robes.

"Bella," Regulus said, in the low, strained voice of someone fighting not to lose their patience. "Bella, please stop."

"Do I spy a grey hair, Tavaris?" Edmund Lestrange said as he entered, his dark-haired and impatient-looking wife on his arm. Desdemona was her name, and she was apparently another one to keep an eye on; "Her brother was set to inherit her parents fortune," Tavaris had said, "but he was mysteriously poisoned the day before the will-reading, leaving everything to her, so watch your drink at all times."

“I’ve had grey hairs for over a decade now, Edmund,” Tavaris said now, raising an unamused eyebrow, “and yet you say that on my every birthday.”

“Humour never dies,” said Edmund.

“Perhaps not, but yours has certainly gotten old.”

The tall, thickset, and very sane-looking Rodolphus Lestrange, hovering behind his father, chuckled deeply, meanwhile his shorter, thinner, and equally sane-looking brother, Rabastan, went to free Regulus from the seemingly tentacle-armed Bellatrix.

“I presume this is her?” Walburga said abruptly, her cold, brown-eyed gaze on Hermione. Her lip curled. “I say, Tavaris, how awfully *brave* of you, wedding a blood traitor. What would your father think?”

There was scattered laughter from the guests who lingered in the front hall. Tavaris’ fingers tightened around the handle of his walking-stick. He dropped his other hand onto Hermione’s shoulder, in a move that would have made her flinch had she not drunk that Draught of Peace.

“I will say this once, and I will not say it again, *Madam* Black,” he said icily, and they all fell silent: “blood traitor or not, her blood remains pure. Not only is she capable of giving House Nott a pure-blood heir but a powerful one, at that. Do not forget the real reason she is here: the Dark Lord deemed her power too great to be left in the hands of Albus Dumbledore.”

“I should think putting her down was surely an option —”

Tavaris continued, speaking over her. “And while *you* had to resort to using your back-up son because you failed to control the original, *I* had her biting her tongue and doing as she’s told by her third day here.” His eyes roved over Walburga’s face, pink-cheeked and incensed, before landing on that of Orion. “Perhaps you should remind your wife not to speak on matters she does not understand. Now,” he added, suddenly smiling, “let us join the others.”

Without another word, he took Hermione’s arm, and they led the way to the sitting room. It was the fastest Hermione had ever seen someone shut Walburga up without the use of a Silencing Charm, and it was marvellous.

Many of the seats in the sitting room were already occupied by the other guests, so when Tavaris took the high-backed armchair by the drink cart, Hermione positioned herself directly behind him, resting her forearms on the back of the chair. In this spot, she could see everyone at once and her back was to the wall. Goppy brought both her and Tavaris each a drink and she sipped slowly as they all chatted amongst themselves. They may not have known that alcohol was not good for a baby, but she did; she also knew, however, that she had a few months still before she had to worry about that.

It was odd to be at an event where she was not expected to mingle, but she did not presently mind; she had nothing nice to say to most of these people, anyway. Instead of speaking, she observed, and took note of each thing she saw.

Walburga and Desdemona Lestrange enjoyed one-upping each other, while Druella Black enjoyed watching them; if Abraxas' voice grew in volume, Evangeline Malfoy would put her hand on his knee and he would lower it again; Orion was just as paranoid as Tavaris had claimed, for his eyes constantly flitted to the door and windows, then to Hermione's hands, as if to verify that she remained unarmed; Gaspar Avery had the filthiest sense of humour she had ever encountered and his father's was no better, which seemed to simultaneously irritate Esther Avery and entertain Angus Mulciber; Cygnus Black found great pleasure in the Silencing Charm on the portrait of Cantankerus Nott, often smirking up at it until Cantankerus began cursing at him noiselessly; if she was not the current centre of attention, Bellatrix would lean forward and draw her upper-arms tight against her sides, pushing her breasts together and drawing the attention of half the room, which never failed to make Narcissa roll her eyes; Lucius studied the way his father manoeuvred his walking-stick as though preparing himself for the day it became his own; and Regulus had to constantly raise his head because it would hang slightly every time his mother glanced his way.

Also, Geoffrey Mulciber spat when he talked.

By the time they were all through with their second drinks of the night (Hermione still sipping her first), they had turned into a bunch of gossiping thirteen-year-olds at their very first slumber party; the stories they each shared were nothing short of entertaining — that, and informative.

"Paulus Parkinson has been fighting tooth and nail to find a husband for his daughter. No such luck, he's had, but what must he expect when the whole of England knows Preciosa is a greedy little harlot? At least her brother's already got himself a wife — and a fine one, Aurelia is."

"Do you know who I saw in Diagon Alley the other day? Fleamont and Euphemia Potter's son, that's who. A fortune Fleamont made off Sleekeazy's Hair Potion, yet that boy looks as though he's not so much as owned a comb in all his life!"

"I was on Charing Cross on Thursday — filthy place, packed with Muggles, I know, but Ivanna Greengrass was at the Leaky and I simply could *not* survive a minute in her presence — what with her bragging about how *perfect* Bedelia is — and you'll never guess who I saw zipping down the road on one of those motorbikes! Oh, your face, Walburga! I don't even have to say, do I?"

"One of Barty's aunts — the one who married Amos Diggory — gave birth to a son last summer — that right, Regulus? Anyway, our Head of Magical Law Enforcement held him for about two seconds before the baby sicked up all over him. None too pleased with Crouch's politics, I'd wager."

"That Xenophilius Lovegood character started his own magazine, did you hear? *The Quibbler*, he calls it. Funny, he should pick that name; the very definition is, 'a person who raises annoying and petty objections,' and that's precisely what he does. Sort of like you after too much wine, Mother. *Ouch*! Bloody hell, woman — it's true! Father, back me up."

"I loathe to ask, but I really must know — how in Merlin's name does Molly Weasley manage to keep her figure? *Five* children, she's had now, and she looks just as she did after

the first! Should you think it will last? Surely, it won't, if Cedrella's boy manages to impregnate her again. Oh, when will it stop? At this rate, they shall have their own little redheaded army in a few years' time!"

"A thought to make one shudder, indeed. But you have seen Honoria Macmillan's waist, haven't you? A sight to behold, she's thin as a quill. Mark my words, Evangeline, we shall all know she's pregnant again by the time she's two weeks into the first trimester. This reminds me; Bellatrix, darling — oh, don't you look at me like that. That expression is highly unbecoming for a young lady."

Hermione had not expected to enjoy herself as much as she presently was; she blamed the Draught of Peace.

Eventually, Dinky came to inform them that dinner had been served; chattering on, the group filed across the hall and into the formal dining room. Tavaris steered Hermione into the seat on his left before lowering himself into the spot at the head of the table, the other head left open. Opposite Hermione sat Abraxas, with Evangeline beside him and Edmund and Desdemona after her, while on her left sat Cygnus, followed by Druella, Narcissa, and Lucius. The rest filled the seats further down the table, with Bellatrix and Rodolphus on either side of the one at the very end.

They had just finished the first course and moved on to the second when this seat was filled.

"I do apologise for my late arrival, Tavaris," Voldemort said, snapping his fingers at Goppy, who hastily filled his goblet. "My presence was required elsewhere."

"There is never a need for you to apologise, my Lord," said Tavaris, with a bow of his head that was copied all around. "I am only grateful that you were willing to make the time to join us, even if for a short while."

"We do all know how busy you are, my Lord," said Bellatrix, batting her eyelashes.

Cygnus and Druella exchanged a meaningful look before simultaneously finishing their drinks.

"I see you have settled in nicely, Lady Nott," Voldemort said, and Hermione stared down the length of the table, half-surprised that he was even speaking to her. "Tell me, might you be the reason Tavaris now has himself a walking-stick?"

Every pair of eyes fell on Hermione.

"Whatever do you mean?" she asked innocently, pulling a confused face. "Tavaris requires one for the same reason Abraxas, here, does. *I* certainly had no part in it."

Abraxas made a disgruntled noise.

"I see," said Voldemort, his lips twitching. "That is my mistake." He glanced at Tavaris, whose expression was carefully blank, then back at Hermione. "You've been causing no trouble, then?"

“None at all.”

“*My Lord*,” Bellatrix sneered. “None at all, *my Lord*.”

The problem with the Draught of Peace was that it left the drinker without fear, and in the absence of fear, one tended to say and do rather stupid things.

“I am no lord, Mrs Lestrange.”

Several people gasped at once. Bellatrix glared at Hermione, her chest rising. Regulus appeared as though he was trying very hard to stifle his amusement.

Hermione thought Harry would have been proud.

“I thought you claimed she had learnt to bite her tongue,” said Walburga, raising a haughty eyebrow at Tavaris.

“To a degree,” he said tightly, shooting Hermione another warning look. “However, she remains, most unfortunately, a Gryffindor.”

Avery and Mulciber Jr both snickered into their goblets.

“Tavaris is correct,” said Voldemort. “There is only so much one can do.”

Twisting her lips, for even she knew not to argue when it came to Lord Voldemort, Walburga dipped her spoon in her soup and resumed eating. Desdemona side-eyed her.

“Has Tavaris yet seen to it that you’ve read the *Ancient Wizarding Traditions* series in preparation for running a household?” Evangeline asked Hermione, quite abruptly. “*Etiquette Edition* would do wonders for you.”

“Of course, he has,” Hermione lied; the *Etiquette* and *Ladyship* editions of that series had spent a month and a half on the bookcase in her bedroom before she had brought them outside and set them on fire with the light of a candlestick, along with every other book on those shelves. It had sent Tavaris into a fit of laughter, as he had watched through the window of his study with the younger Mulciber and Avery. As though he had read her mind, Voldemort gave a low chuckle.

“The series was written by Misapinoa Black, you know,” Orion put in casually.

“Was it, really?” gasped Avery Sr, mockingly astounded. “You *must* tell us more.”

From there, the conversation rapidly descended into whose ancestor had done what, and Hermione was left alone. The competition lasted until Bellatrix pointed out that Voldemort’s ancestor was Salazar Slytherin, and from there it spiralled into whether Muggle-borns should be kept out of Hogwarts or hunted down and killed, which led to yet another debate on whether such killings should be carried out violently or quickly and with mercy.

There was so much that Hermione wished she could tell them all about the future, as they laughed and drank and spat their vitriol, just to see the looks on their faces.

By dessert, the only people at the table who were not heavily intoxicated were Voldemort and herself. He seemed to take that as his cue to leave, and he did so with a "To many more years of life" to Tavaris and a knowing nod to Hermione. It was not long after that Bellatrix, too, slipped away, and the rest returned to the sitting room. Dinky moved the gramophone back, so they could continue listening to music, and then Hermione was given the opportunity to observe them all once more, this time thoroughly and atrociously drunk.

Narcissa giggled frequently, seeming to find everything outrageously funny; Avery and Mulciber Sr sang, often the lyrics to a song entirely different from the one playing; Esther and Druella wound up in a heated argument over the colour of the drapes, meanwhile Cygnus and Orion removed the Silencing Charm on Cantankerus' portrait to demand he finally admit to having sent out the pamphlet that listed the so-called members of the Sacred Twenty-Eight back in the 1930s; Tavaris and Abraxas followed one another in circles around the room, smacking each other's ankles with their respective walking-sticks; Desdemona forced Rodolphus to dance with her, loudly informing him that he should have danced with his wife more at the start of their marriage, for only then would she not have left with another man; Avery and Mulciber Jr made it their mission to empty the contents of the drink cart; apparently bored of having no one to shout at, Walburga joined her husband and brother in front of Cantankerus' portrait to do just this; Edmund held Rabastan down in one of the armchairs and proceeded to go into explicit detail on how one ought to go about pleasing a woman; and poor Regulus was so small and thin that he could not hold his liquor and was in utter distress over not remembering where the nearest bathroom was.

Taking pity on him, Hermione crossed the room and guided him through the door just outside, into the powder room, where Regulus promptly dropped to his knees in front of the toilet and proceeded to rid himself of his dinner. To save him the embarrassment, she shut the door, then went to dampen one of the hand-towels with cool water.

"I don't understand," Regulus gasped after a minute of retching, raising his head. "Why? Why in the world did they allow me hard liquor?"

"I'm afraid I cannot answer that," Hermione said. She crouched beside him to wipe his face with the damp towel. "Your parents do a lot that I, too, fail to understand."

"You," Regulus breathed, his eyes widening in recognition. He attempted to bat away her hand and she smacked it aside with her other one, continuing to clean him up. "You were friends with Sirius."

"I was."

"Why?"

Hermione paused, staring at him.

"Why?" she repeated, and then clarified, "why was I friends with Sirius?"

Regulus bobbed his head in some semblance of a nod. He was leaning heavily on the mahogany seat of the toilet.

“I rather think the better question is, ‘Why not?’” said Hermione, resuming. “Your brother is a good friend to have.”

“He is not —” Regulus hiccoughed, “— my brother. He is —” he hiccoughed again, “— Potter’s brother.”

Lowering the towel, Hermione sat back on her heels. She frowned at him.

“Had you — hadn’t you known that? Everyone knows that.” Regulus suddenly made a terrified face, adding quickly, “Look away,” before vomiting into the toilet again. When he next resurfaced, catching his breath, she unfolded and refolded the towel to wipe the vomit off his chin with the clean side.

“He’s still *your* brother, too, you know,” she said pointedly. “You’d both do well to remember that.”

Regulus hiccoughed in response; his eyes were half-open. Music and laughter could still be heard from the next room.

“Are you going to be sick again?” Hermione asked, and he took a minute to consider this before shaking his head. She tossed the towel onto the countertop and stood, holding out her hands. “All right, up you get, then.”

“*But that’s so much work*,” Regulus moaned, nearly whimpering.

“Regulus Arcturus Black, you stand up right now or I will make you stand up.”

“Fine, fine!” He grasped her hands, and she yanked him mightily to his feet; he stumbled forwards, his head landing on her shoulder. He sniffed, then gagged. “Your perfume smells horrendous.”

“How kind of you to say,” Hermione sighed, wrapping an arm around his waist. She half-guided and half-dragged him out the door, stopping at the entrance to the sitting room. Inside, both Dinky and Goppy were serving the guests (who had grown even louder) another round of drinks which they positively did not need, walking-sticks were now being swung at a portrait rather than ankles, and Rodolphus was gone, his mother dancing instead with his father whilst Rabastan —

Hermione sighed again; Rabastan was sprawled on a footstool by the hearth, and did not appear especially cognisant, nor, for that matter, entirely conscious. Sixteen years old, he and Regulus were, and neither of their parents had thought to cut them off at any point in the night. After warring with herself for a moment, she encouraged Regulus to lean against the wall and went to wake up Rabastan. She said his name, tapped his cheek lightly, and then resorted to giving him an actual slap, which proved successful.

“Get up, come on,” Hermione said, taking one of his hands. Groaning and rubbing his eyes, Rabastan staggered upright, dodged a flying walking-stick by what seemed to be pure chance, and followed her out of the sitting room. “Regulus —” she looked skyward, wishing

for her patience to be topped up, then back down at Regulus, who was on the floor, "— Regulus, it's high time you'd gone to bed."

Regulus shook his head stubbornly.

"D'you honestly think you've the authority to —?" Rabastan broke off with a gaping yawn. He wobbled and sagged against her.

Hermione peered over her shoulder, hoping to catch Dinky's or Goppy's attention, but they were both busy attending to the guests. Looking back round, she shuffled herself and Rabastan closer to Regulus, then helped him back up, nearly falling over herself in the process. Finally, with the two of them clinging to either side of her, she began the now excruciatingly long trek up to the guest bedrooms on the second floor.

"This is so humiliating," Regulus mumbled as they reached the first, Hermione already panting from the effort of keeping them all upright. "I'm going to hate myself in the morning, I can already sense it coming on."

"Look on the brigh'side," slurred Rabastan, his head lolling onto Hermione's shoulder, "perhaps —" he yawned again, "— perhaps you won't remember it."

Regulus hiccoughed, then said, "That'd be grand."

"Oh — ha — oh, shit, you remember that — that time we — we nicked your father's brandy and Barty —"

He nodded, snickering against Hermione's neck —

"— puked all over the study floor —" Rabastan, too, was snickering, uncontrollably so.

"It sunk into the carpet! And Evan tried to —" Regulus attempted to continue, "— he tried to clean it up with his — *his bare hands* — so my mother —"

"— *so your mother wouldn't find out*!" cried Rabastan.

"But then, you remember — Kreacher caught us —"

"Oh, fuck, *Kreacher*!"

"And he — he —" Regulus stopped abruptly, gulping. "I lied; I'm going to be sick again."

"Hold it in," Hermione ordered, heaving them both round the final corner of the several-yards-long bannister and onto the first step of the next set of stairs. "We've almost made it, Regulus."

"I don't believe I can —" Regulus gulped again, louder, and shook his head, pressing his lips together.

"If you puke on me, Regulus," said Rabastan, "I will fling you over this railing. That's a —" he leaned away from Hermione, peering over the railing and down at the ground floor, from

which the sounds of the ongoing party rose. “I cannot do the maths right now but it’s a long fall.”

“You mustn’t,” said Regulus, miserable.

“One foot in front of the other, boys,” Hermione told them firmly, panting still. “We’re nearly at the top.” Truthfully, they were not even halfway there, but neither of one of them was in any state to realise.

Eventually, they did succeed in reaching the second-floor landing, and she steered them into the first guest bedroom. The moment they crossed the threshold, Rabastan stumbled forwards, tripping up on the cool-toned Persian rug, and flopped onto the bed, landing face-down on the thick, cobalt-blue blankets. He did not get back up.

“Toilet,” Regulus rasped, “quickly.”

Hoping he could contain himself just a few seconds longer, Hermione pulled him along into the second guest room, which was identical to the first but decorated in shades of green rather than blue, and onward into the ensuite. Again, Regulus fell to his knees before the toilet, and she raised the lid a split-second before he vomited. She once more dampened a hand-towel and crouched beside him.

“Stop it,” he told her hoarsely when he came up for air. “Stop looking at me.”

“Where would you prefer that I look, Regulus?” Hermione asked wearily.

“Anywhere but me,” said Regulus, grimacing. “I’m being disgusting.” With that, he crawled across the grey tiles and clambered into the clawfoot tub, ducking out of sight.

Hermione lowered herself the rest of the way to the floor. Resting her back against the wall, she said, “I never thought I’d say this, but you may potentially be worse than Sirius when you drink.”

Regulus’ head shot up from behind the rim of the tub. He gaped at her, appalled.

“You take that back!”

“I won’t. You are acting like a *child*. At least when *he* was drunk, Sirius still acted like — oh, you know — *Sirius*.”

Regulus disappeared again. After a moment, he asked, sounding hesitant, “How do you mean?”

Setting the towel down beside her, Hermione reached over to yank on the long chord that hung from the top of the toilet, flushing its contents, then returned to resting against the wall.

“Do you remember hearing about that break-in at Honeydukes, back in March? Well, that was us, quite regrettably.”

“‘Course, it was.”

“We snuck out to a pub in London that night for Remus’s birthday, and we all got — well, I do suppose *sloshed* truly is the right for it. We played — oh, but what was it called — Who Did the Niffler Steal From? Anyway, by the end of it, Sirius could no longer sit up. He disappeared into the lavatory for about — say, twenty minutes or so. Remus and I went to check on him and we found him retching in one of the urinals.”

She smiled to herself, shaking her head in fond exasperation.

“It took probably twenty minutes more for us to get him out of there — and that was with the added help of James and Peter. Can you guess what Sirius did as soon as we were out?”

“What did he do?” whispered Regulus.

“He got into a pub brawl.”

He laughed softly.

“We were sent out after that, rightfully so, and called the Knight Bus to take us back to Hogsmeade,” Hermione continued. “Sirius, evidently without manners, threw money on the street for the poor conductor to pick up, then just plopped himself down on the nearest bed, which, I will add, was already occupied — by his pot-dealer, no less. He tried to buy himself some, in fact, right then and there. You do know what pot is, don’t you?” she added, realising Regulus might not.

“*A* pot, do you mean?”

“Er — no. It’s a Muggle … plant.”

“I suppose if it’s dealt, it’s the sort one smokes, then?”

“You know, it’s not important to the story, actually,” she said, and she rushed on. “*Anyway*, James had to pay for a bucket because Sirius was sick every time we stopped, and he even gave the conductor extra so Sirius could take the bucket with him when we got off. He carried it all the way up High Street and into Honeydukes, where he wound up spilling it all over the floor, as well as an entire display of Sugar Quills. Peter slipped in the puddle, and I had to put a Silencing Charm on Sirius so he wouldn’t wake the whole village with his laughter.”

“He’s very loud,” Regulus agreed.

“Yes, he is.”

“Why were you in Honeydukes in the first place?”

“This is highly confidential, you understand, but there’s a passageway in the cellar,” Hermione told him. “It leads straight into Hogwarts.”

“So, they thought there’d been a break-in,” said Regulus slowly, “because Sirius’s puke was all over the shop?”

“That, and because James lost his glasses in the brawl and knocked over several displays and Mary also left a trail of sweets behind her. Poor Mr Flume, the place was left a disaster.”

Regulus was silent for long enough that she was half-convinced that he had passed out, but then he asked her, poking his head out again, “May I sleep here?”

“No,” said Hermione at once, and she forced herself to her feet. She picked up the towel, ran it under the faucet once again, and came over to wipe his mouth. She then tossed the towel onto the counter and helped him out of the tub. Thankfully, the bed was just a few short steps away; he was able to climb up onto it by himself, moaning in relief. She went round to remove his shoes for him and, lifting his legs, dragged back the moss-green blankets so she could slip them underneath, then tucked him in.

There were not enough words within the English language to sufficiently describe how good it felt to tuck someone in again. Hermione missed pulling Hugo’s blue and orange cosmic-patterned duvet up to his chin and brushing Rose’s hair out of her eyes; she missed kissing them goodnight before turning off the light, then creeping back inside before going to bed herself, just to see them sleeping there, safe, all curled up and hugging (in Hugo’s case) a book or (in Rose’s) a stuffed Jack Russell Terrier named Bertie.

Hermione felt as though someone had physically yanked on her heartstrings when Regulus murmured sleepily, “Is this what mothers are supposed to do?”

“Yes,” she said softly, her eyes prickling at the corners. “This is precisely what mothers are supposed to do.”

He said no more, and she blew out the light.

*

The following morning when Hermione woke, the estate had been emptied of its guests, Tavaris was still recovering in his bedroom, and Dinky and Goppy were going about cleaning everything up. Wrapped in a silk dressing robe, she drank a cup of tea in the conservatory, the windows of which had droplets of rain sliding down them, for it had begun to drizzle, the grounds occluded by a layer of mist. She then returned to her room, going back to sleep in a bed that had already gone cold.

As September finally arrived and the scarce summer heat retreated, Rose and Hugo appeared in her dreams more than ever before, often alongside Theodore, and she would wake crying, a terrible ache in her chest.

“Fourteen and twelve, and they’ll never see their mother again. They’ll just have their father, and you’ll just have me. So … will you love me the same?”

Even still, Hermione did not know the answer. Sometimes, however, she thought she might even be grateful for Theodore’s impending arrival, the sole reason for which was that she longed for someone to hold again; she longed to stopped being alone.

On the nineteenth of September, this wish was granted to her, although not in any way she could have predicted.

Her morning had begun as most of her mornings now did; a long bath followed by tea in the conservatory, as well as what little breakfast she could manage to eat, before returning to her room to either properly dress for the day or go back to sleep. She had still been deciding between the latter two when the knock came.

Immediately apprehensive, she wrapped her dressing gown more securely around herself and went to open the door.

Tavaris stood in the hall outside, one hand on his walking-stick and the other holding, close to his chest, a rather large, neatly-wrapped box with a light blue bow on the top.

He raised an eyebrow when all Hermione did was stare at him, her lips parted, speechless.

"What?" he teased. "Did you really think I'd forget your birthday? Step aside," he added when she continued to stare, and she opened the door to let him in, closing her mouth. He strode past her, his walking-stick *thudding* on the hardwood, and placed the box on the foot of her four-poster.

"You got me … a present," Hermione said at length, waiting for him to correct her.

"You've been good these last couple of months," Tavaris told her, turning to seat himself beside the box. He leaned his walking-stick up against the nearest post. "You've done as you were told and you've kept to yourself, and you've not complained once. That, darling, deserves a reward."

"A reward?" she said suspiciously, crossing her arms over her chest. "What sort of reward?"

He nodded to the box.

"Open it," he said, "and find out."

Hermione studied him for a moment, unsure, then, tentatively, uncrossing her arms, she approached the bed. Once reaching it, she glanced back up, narrowing her eyes; Tavaris just nodded to the box again. Her apprehension doubling, she carefully removed the ribbon and lifted the lid.

Inside the box, his yellow eyes blinking up at her curiously, was a tiny ginger kitten with bandy legs, a bottlebrush tail, and a small, squashed-looking face.

"He's half-Kneazle," she heard Tavaris say, as though from a great distance, "according to the shopkeeper at Magical Menagerie, so he's supposed to be highly intelligent. There was a whole litter up for sale, you know — a lot of them better-looking than this one — but I thought his face was rather funny, you see … What will you name him?"

"Crookshanks," Hermione said at once. "His name is Crookshanks."

Chapter End Notes

Giving one's new wife a cat was actually once a common practice in some places; it was reasoned that a cat — or really a pet in general — would be beneficial to a newly-married woman because it would give her something to nurture before she had children. A literal place-holder for a baby.

Also, the story that Regulus and Rabastan (try to) tell in this chapter of themselves, Barty Jr, and Evan Rosier is actually one that I took from two friends of mine; the first time they ever drank, one of them did, indeed, attempt to clean the other's vomit with their bare hands to keep their mum from finding out.

The Library

Chapter Summary

> Do you walk in the valley of kings?
> Do you walk in the shadow of men
> Who sold their lives to a dream?
> Do you ponder the manner of things
> In the dark
> The dark, the dark, the dark
> — Glitter & Gold, Barns Courtney

Chapter Notes

> CW: I had to add the Archive Warning for Graphic Depictions of Violence for the sole reason of the contents of the Nott family library...
>
> One quote in this chapter was taken from Ch.10, Kreacher's Tale, of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows. All credits, of course, go to JKR.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Over the course of the following month, Hermione followed Crookshanks on his many adventures throughout the estate, happier than she had been since June, perhaps even before that. It felt as though one of the many cracks upon her heart had resealed itself overnight; Crookshanks was now the glue holding her together.

He was positively adorable as a kitten, so much so that it nearly brought her to tears a time or two. In the future, he had been big enough that she and Ron had needed to keep an eye on him when he had been near baby Rose and Hugo, lest he accidentally crushed one of them. Now, he fit snugly in the crook between her neck and shoulder, perched there so he could investigate that which was out of reach.

After his initial perusal of the estate, there came a pattern in Crookshanks' adventuring; he returned to certain rooms and objects time and time again, apparently having deemed them the most suitable subjects for his unending metaphysical inquiries. One of these was the odd non-magical fern in the conservatory. Hermione's morning tea and breakfast lasted longer and longer, for Crookshanks often refused to leave the fern's side, forcing her to eat more, picking at her food for something to do whilst he investigated. She was glad that he steered clear of the magical plants, at least, because some of those really were quite dangerous. The fern, being a fern, posed no threat to him, no matter how much he sniffed at it.

Another place Crookshanks often returned to was Tavaris' study; however, Hermione was less willing to linger there until he satisfied his curiosity, and by November, Crookshanks had learned not to go there when the room was in use.

He had gotten better at hopping up onto high-up places by then, too, and had subsequently begun taking naps in the bassinet in the nursery. This particular habit was one she had conflicting feelings about, but she would dutifully situate herself on the armchair nearby and read while he dozed.

It was a rather pretty nursery, Hermione thought, with the gentle shades of green and grey and the soft rug that warmed her feet. It even had windows, which her own room did not, and she would draw back the thick curtains to let the sunshine in, washing over the room with its golden glow.

Because of Crookshanks, Hermione also wound up seeing more of Tavaris' "students." Although he left the study alone if it was occupied, be it during dinner, out on the grounds where they practised spellwork, or elsewhere, Crookshanks would follow them, Hermione trailing unenthusiastically in his wake. He seemed to enjoy sitting not at or by but directly on Angus Mulciber's feet, perching on high surfaces to sniff at the slick strands of Gaspar Avery's dark blond hair, and watching Snape avidly from afar, or unnervingly, depending on one's perspective. Additionally, when the four of them came during their weekend trips to Hogsmeade Village, he took to jumping up onto Regulus' lap and whining until he was pet, purposely tripping Rabastan up whilst he was in the middle of a duel (which sent those present into fits of laughter), using Evan Rosier's left leg as a scratching post, and climbing Barty Crouch Jr as if he were a ladder to nibble on his ears.

Although at first it had made her nervous, as time went on, Hermione found interest in the lessons that Tavaris taught. Most were about Dark Magic and there were far too many tirades about Voldemort and how absolutely splendid he was, but even so, it was fascinating to observe the differences between the lessons each group was given. Voldemort, it became clear, wanted them all trained in specific areas.

For example, Rabastan, Evan, Gaspar, and Angus were all being trained for combat. They were forced to duel both one another and Tavaris until out of breath and drenched in sweat, sometimes even until they could no longer stand. Snape, on the other hand, was mostly made to study the creation and alteration of spells. He and Tavaris often spoke of the power of intention and how to find the perfect incantation through the meaning and significance of that intention. Latin textbooks and dictionaries frequently laid about; she learned that the incantation for the spell to prevent eavesdropping, *Muffliato*, translated to *muffled*, and *Sectumsempra* was a combination of the Latin words for *cut* and *forever*. In the cases of Regulus and Barty, lessons were typically centred upon politics and magical law, although, for all, there was still some spell-casting, here and there.

"As the future Lord Black, Regulus will be most useful in swaying public opinion and expanding the Dark Lord's following, especially within the Wizengamot," Tavaris told Hermione one Sunday evening, after Apparating Regulus and Barty back to the outskirts of Hogsmeade before students would be expected back at Hogwarts Castle. "The Blacks remain

a powerful family, regardless of how many of their own have had to be discarded. Regulus needs to learn how to use that power to his advantage."

"What about Orion?" Hermione asked. "Isn't he the current Lord Black?"

"No, it remains his father, but Orion's got a weak heart," said Tavaris, "always has. We don't believe he shall be around much longer, and Arcturus is ageing quickly so neither will he, and then Regulus will take his place. Arcturus has attempted to prepare him, of course, as is his responsibility, but to be frank, Regulus is hopeless where public-speaking is concerned. He lacks the necessary confidence.

"Barty is better, which is helpful in his position as a spy. He's our eyes and ears in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement; soon enough, he will graduate and take whatever job his father sets up for him, and then he will be our hands as well. Files could mysteriously go missing, certain missives could fail to reach their intended recipients … You see, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant a low-ranking position may seem, it will always have its advantages. No one thinks twice about the barely-of-age witch or wizard managing their paperwork for them, now, do they?"

This last bit was something Hermione could attest to; she had never once considered an issue in the sensitive information that her secretary had access to. After all, Ethel had just been a secretary. She had been friendly and kind, and she had kept a bowl of sweets on her desk for when Hermione's children had visited. If she had wanted, she could have poisoned them; she could have poisoned the tea that, daily, she had served Hermione. She could have also stopped important files, paperwork, and missives from reaching Hermione's desk, or have delivered forged messages from foreign dignitaries that might have sparked all out political warfare.

So much power had been in Ethel's hands, and Hermione had not even realised it.

It was unsurprising that no one had ever suspected Barty of being a Death Eater. He was the son of the Head of Magical Law Enforcement; how could he possibly be involved in anything nefarious?

The only lessons about which Hermione knew very little were those of Bellatrix. Her knowledge consisted solely of what Tavaris told her, which was that Bellatrix was taught privately by Voldemort and came each month to practise that which she had learned from him. Hermione thought it was for the best; she probably didn't want to know what sort of things Voldemort shared or did with his future first lieutenant when no one else was around.

As the temperature of the air dropped in the last week of November, the winds growing suddenly harsher and steel-grey skies overpowering the last remnants of sunshine, the damage caused by the spells Hermione had seen taught began to crop up in *The Daily Prophet*.

The family of a Muggle-born witch named Elizabeth Hartley, who was a fifth-year Hufflepuff at Hogwarts, were found dead in their home in Surrey, not from the Killing Curse, but from crushed windpipes. The spell's incantation was *Arteriam Contundito*; Evan had tried it out on a sparrow, which had later wound up in the belly of a purring Crookshanks.

Os Remotionem was a curse that Rabastan had used on another unlucky sparrow-turned-meal to remove all the bones in its body, essentially turning into a soup of blood, flesh, and organs. This was how a Muggle farmer by the name of Dougal McGregor and his wife and children were found on their farm in Aberdeenshire on the twenty-eighth of the month. The attack had appeared random at first, and would remain so to most, but it was through Tavaris that Hermione learned McGregor had long ago been briefly engaged to Professor McGonagall. The McGregors hadn't been the true targets of the attack; it had been her. Hermione cried herself to sleep that night, wishing she could write Professor McGonagall a letter to tell her how deeply sorry she was.

Ahren Winger, a half-blood wizard who wrote short stories and poems often printed in the *Prophet* — most of which subtly rebutted all that the Death Eaters stood for — fell victim to the *Sectumsempra* curse in the early hours of the first of December, alongside his wife, Adela. Their six-year-old son, Talbott, had only narrowly escaped the same fate.

The frequency of the attacks grew in the weeks that followed, accompanied by increasingly low temperatures. Lessons taught on the grounds of the Nott Estate were put on hold, for even the strongest of Hot Air Charms could not keep the cold at bay. On the eighth of December, the *Prophet* printed the headline, *MUGGLES PREDICT COLDEST WINTER SINCE 1963*. Hermione scanned the article below as she ate breakfast in the conservatory, dreading that which she had only just remembered; the winter of 1978 to '79 would be so harsh that it would later be called, "The Winter of Discontent."

She was not looking forward to it.

"Dinky?" she called with a slight sigh, leaning back in her seat. In a second, Dinky appeared beside the clothed table. "This winter is set to be a particularly unpleasant one." She gestured to the *Prophet*. "There have been reports that it may be the coldest since nineteen-sixty-three. The charms for heat will have to be renewed and the fireplaces kept burning."

"Dinky will inform Master Tavaris when he is returning from the Ministry," Dinky grumbled, discontent. "I fetches more kindling."

Hermione frowned, eyeing the pillowcase Dinky wore. "Must you go out to the forest for that yourself? You'll freeze."

"Dinky does not wish to freeze," said Dinky shortly, "so Dinky will not."

"Very well, then," she said sceptically. "Will you please also inform Tavaris that I'll be needing warmer clothes? Jumpers and woollen tights, perhaps?"

"Dinky will, Mistress. Mistress Mione mustn't be going blue from cold when she be having Master Tavaris' heir in her."

She sighed again, wearily.

"That's right, Dinky, thank you."

Nodding once — their own mockery of a bow — Dinky left.

Hermione looked over at Crookshanks, curled up on the tiled floor beside the fern. He raised his head at her attention.

“I’ll find you a good blanket to keep you warm,” she told him decidedly. “Maybe I can ask Tavaris to get you a bed to put there, keep you cosy.” She scanned the surrounding floor-length windows. “I’d wager this room will be the coldest.”

Crookshanks yawned widely and uncurled to stretch, then got up and made his way over to the paned-glass doors, at which point he sat, waiting for her to join him. She finished off the last of her tea and rose from her seat to follow him out.

Unsurprisingly, he led her to the study.

“You really love it in here, don’t you?” Hermione said exasperatedly, as he scampered over to the wide-ranging bookcase behind Tavaris’ desk. “Is it the books, then? Anything there you think I should read?”

Crookshanks meowed and leapt up onto one of the black leather arms of Tavaris’ chair to attempt to paw at the books on the fourth (or possibly fifth) shelf. He meowed louder when he failed to reach them. Hermione rounded the desk to tap several books at random, trying to work out which one had Crookshanks’ attention. When her finger landed on a thin one bound in worn red leather, he hopped down and rose feebly for it, meowing louder still.

“This one?” said Hermione, raising an eyebrow. “What’s so special about this one?”

He only continued to meow in response.

“All right, then.” She pulled on the book, but it did not budge. Brow furrowing, she pulled harder, managing only to tip it towards herself; at the same time, there was an ominous *creaking* sound, and the bookcase began to shift, splitting evenly down the middle, the two halves then drawing apart to reveal a dark, narrow passageway with a winding stone steps.

Hermione’s jaw dropped. Fearlessly, Crookshanks darted up the stairs, round the corner, and out of sight. She trailed slowly after him, stunned beyond words.

On the topmost step, she stopped and stood for a moment. A laugh bubbled up in her throat, escaping in a breathy sound of awed delight.

The stairs opened up into a large room with dark grey carpeting and seaweed-green wallpaper with a pattern of creeping black vines; bookcases that reached the ceiling covered nearly every stretch of wall and divided the left half of the room into slim sections, their contents overflowing onto the floor as precariously balanced stacks which created a small maze; a round mahogany table on the right was littered with parchment, quills, inkwells, and journals that looked as though they had been passed down at least three generations; sat upon smaller tables that were scattered about were all sorts of oddities like glass jars, magnifying glasses, and old maps; and on bits of free wall hung tapestries, another map, silver clocks, and a mediaeval-looking display of swords.

“Oh, Crookshanks,” Hermione said, grinning broadly, “you clever, clever cat.”

If a cat could smirk, she was quite sure that was what Crookshanks would have done then, looking as satisfied as he did, perched atop the round table.

Not knowing where to begin, Hermione wandered in a daze, gazing in wonder at everything she saw.

The map on the wall, it turned out, was one of the entire Eastern Hemisphere, on which the movements of Nott ancestors dating back hundreds of years had been recorded; it had not been updated in some time, though, as it still included the Ottoman Empire, Austria-Hungary, Prussia, and several other countries that she knew had not survived past both World War I and II. The clocks each displayed an opposing time, little plaques beneath them explaining they were all set to different time zones. One tapestry depicted a wizard Disarming another, who then drew his sword and charged at him, slicing him straight through the middle; the sword was identical to the ones on the wall just beside it, their handles engraved with what must have been the Nott family crest.

On the cover of one of the journals on the round table was the same crest, in this case with a motto printed just beneath it: *Potentia in Silentio*. Hermione searched for the Latin dictionary she had seen Snape with and found it on the seat of one of the chairs tucked into the table. She dropped down onto it as she rapidly began verifying her own translation. Once finished, she frowned, taken aback by the result. It was just as she had predicted, but not at all what she had expected: *Power in Silence*.

She rather liked it.

It was not until Hermione opened that first journal, flipping to a page at random, that the wonderfulness of the finally-found library seeped away, replaced by a sickening awareness of just whom the items there belonged to.

Last night as I was returning from Olivia's quarters, I found myself wondering what might occur if one were to combine pain with pleasure. Although my darling Olivia was responsible for inspiring such wonderings, the particular method I have since concluded on is one I could never bring myself to force upon such loveliness. Nor, I should say, would it be a most enjoyable task to find Cantankerus a new governess. By good fortune, Olivia's sister, Iris, came to spend the winter season at the Hall to escape the cold winds of the village below.

I brought Iris down to the cellar when she arrived in the early hours of today, before the sun had reached its full height, and there I encouraged her to drink a vial of Amortentia. My good fortune never ceases, it would seem, for I had half a cauldron of the potion leftover from the centaur experiment of last month! I was only made to wait a handful of seconds until Iris began confessing her undying affection for me. I was unable to resist indulging her some before carrying on to the second stage of the experiment: the application of the Torture Curse, Cruciatus.

How she pleaded so! Again and again, she begged and cried and screamed, yet never requested that I should stop. One should think she would be pleading for mercy, but not at all; just the opposite, she pleaded for forgiveness. Such terrible wrongs she believed to have

done I whom she claimed to love forsaking all others. "Please Lord Nott!" she cried to me. "Whatever I have done to wound you tell me so I may repent!"

I lifted the curse sporadically for it would not do to have her losing her facilities so early into the experiment. Each time she was freed of pain Iris attempted to appease me; she begged on her hands and knees and kissed the hem of my robes, and then she expanded to more creative paths towards appeasement.

She now rests in the quarters I set up for her, hidden from all but myself and Goppy, and awaits the next stage of the experiment. I should like to speak further on the effects of stages one and two, and in addition my plan and predictions for stage three, however I must go now to comfort Olivia in her mourning. "Such awfulness!" she must be thinking. "My sister, so young she is not yet at Hogwarts, vanishing on her journey to Nottingham Hall!" If only I could bring her relief with the knowledge that little Iris is safe and sound two floors below.

Several minutes came and went before Hermione was able to quench the urge to vomit. She flipped to the front of the journal to look at the name scrawled inside the cover: *Torsten Nott*.

This wizard was the father, she assumed, of Cantankerus, and therefore the grandfather of Tavaris, and the great-grandfather of Theodore. His journal was a prime example of the sort of family she would be bringing a child into.

Hermione had previously been under the impression that she knew the lengths to which humanity's cruelty could extend. After all, she had fought and survived a war, and who knew cruelty better than a soldier? Now, however, she felt as though she had only the feeblest of grasps on that knowledge.

The journal was filled to the brim with notes on other experiments Torsten Nott had conducted, as well as on the spells that he had created. *Arteriam Contundito*, the curse to crush windpipes, and *Os Remotionem*, the one to remove all bones, were both there. Torsten had gone on for two whole pages about why crushing one's windpipe was better than cutting it, because a torn windpipe led to difficulty breathing and could be repaired if treated quickly, whereas a crushed one caused a person to choke on their own blood and suffocate. There was a note within the description for the latter curse that declared it *useful for obtaining organs for study and dissection*, and another that was scribbled on the top-left corner of the same page revealed that it *causes inanimate objects to collapse*.

Halfway through the journal, Hermione came across *Exsanguis Cerebri* — a curse that slowed and eventually stopped blood flow to the brain, essentially causing a stroke. It was noted that slowing rather than immediately stopping prolonged the victim's suffering.

This was the sort of information that Tavaris was teaching; this was what the youngest of the Death Eaters were learning.

What had they done that had not reached the papers, she wondered, or even the ears of those they fought? So many people had gone missing in both wars and their fates remained

unknown even in 2020. What sort of atrocities had been forced upon them, if this was what the Death Eaters were capable of?

Circumquaque Disperdet (translation: 'destroy all around'): wand movement involves a wide, horizontal arc and projects a burst of golden-yellow light. Results in: an uniquely damaging explosion with an approximately sixty-yard radius, however a one-yard radius of protection from the point at which it is cast, so keeping the caster unharmed; all those struck are wiped out within seconds, perhaps even milliseconds.

She stared at the page with her mouth hanging partly open, the fine hairs on her arms rising and goosebumps breaking out across her skin.

This, Hermione was certain, was the spell Peter had used to kill those twelve Muggles on the first of November in 1981; the cause of the infamous massacre with which he had faked his own death and seen Sirius sent to Azkaban.

On the next page was a diagram of the spell's effects, accompanied by a few notes on its creation and the long line of test subjects for it. If the spell that had killed those Muggles belonged to the Nott family, hidden away in their personal library, there was only one way Peter could have learned it; sometime before 1981, he would be added to the list of young Death Eaters who visited the Nott Estate for lessons from Tavaris.

Shockingly, the first thought that went through Hermione's head upon that realisation was, *That rat is going to be in the same house as my son*, and then she sat very still, gazing at nothing in particular, and wondered why she had not thought this before, about every other Death Eater who stepped foot in the estate. Voldemort had visited himself more than once.

My son, she thought faintly, and she was not thinking of Hugo. *These people are going to be around my son.*

All at once, she was seized by a terror so great and an outrage so fierce that she could not move; overwhelmed, she could do no more than breathe, and even that proved difficult. How was she meant to raise a child in this house, surrounded by these people? How was she meant to protect him from them? To protect his mind, even, from all that they would attempt to instil in him? This was the environment in which he would grow up, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Trembling, Hermione took Crookshanks and left the library. She did not return for a week.

Infancy Draught, she read on the following Tuesday, wrapped up in a thick wool blanket with Crookshanks curled on her lap, and it was not a potion for de-ageing. At least, not physically; it de-aged one's mind, returning it to that of their newborn self, unable to care for themselves nor handle bodily functions and movement of limbs. *Note: place Silencing Charm on victim to avoid hearing their cries.*

She had finished the journal of Torsten Nott and was now on to that of his brother, Wilfred, who had experimented with potions. Unlike Torsten, Wilfred gave each of his creations a name; on the next page, she was faced with a neatly printed title: *The Drink of Despair*. It was described as a mind-addling potion that induced fear, delirium, intense stomach pain, and extreme thirst.

"Kreacher drank, and as he drank, he saw terrible things ... Kreacher's insides burned ... Kreacher cried for Master Regulus to save him, he cried for his Mistress Black, but the Dark Lord only laughed ... He made Kreacher drink all the potion ..."

Tightening her grip on the journal, Hermione skimmed through the list of ingredients: Ashwinder Egg, which was used in both Love Potions and Felix Felicis; African Sea Salt, used in the Draught of Living Death; Bloodroot, a poisonous plant that killed animal cells; Crocodile Heart; Death-Cap, an extremely poisonous mushroom; extract of Gurdyroot; Jobberknoll feather, which was used in Truth Serums and Memory Potions; Lovage, used in Confusing Concoctions and Befuddlement Draughts; powdered sage, also used in Memory Potions; and Sneezewort, a poisonous plant which was used in Befuddlement Draughts as well.

Nearly every ingredient on the list was used in another potion to alter one's perception of thought, and this did not surprise her. What did surprise her was that there was no mention of Dementors; she had long suspected there to be some sort of Dementor-related ingredient in this particular potion to induce the terrifying visions that it did.

The brewing process was a tricky one.

Crush freshly extracted crocodile heart and release juices into cauldron, add one stone worth of sliced bloodroot and a pinch of African Sea Salt, then stir clockwise eight times; potion should be a rose colour. Let sit for one hour; potion should be red. Next, add five sliced Death-Caps and powdered Ashwinder Egg, then add extract of Gurdyroot and stir counter-clockwise ten times; potion should turn a dark reddish-brown. Add one Jobberknoll feather, sliced lovage, powdered sage, and sneezewort. Stir clockwise four times, pause for thirty minutes, then stir another four times; potion should now be a sage-green. Let sit for five months and keep in a cool, dark space; potion should then be a nearly translucent emerald. Cast Impervius Charm, Shield Charm, and Anti-Vanishing Spell on potion for good measure.

The five-month waiting period, Wilfred had observed, was necessary to strengthen the potion and its effects. Five months was apparently ideal, but the longer it was left to sit in a cool, dark space, the stronger it would become.

How long had the potion been left in that unlit cave by the sea where Voldemort had hidden Slytherin's Locket before Kreacher had drunk it? How long before Regulus had, or Professor Dumbledore?

Hermione longed to know, yet she doubted that the answer would do her any good.

She got it three days later, nonetheless, when she returned to the library to find Wilfred's journal open to the page and a checklist of the ingredients laid out beside it, every one of them checked off. At the bottom was a note which read: *To be completed in haste and delivered to the Dark Lord prior to the five-month waiting period.*

Christmas arrived a week later, bitter and cold, celebrated with a feast for two and not much else, and Hermione received warmer clothing from Tavaris to add to her wardrobe. The next week brought them into 1979, and she now longed for the answer to another question that she doubted would do her any good.

How much time does Regulus have left?

Chapter End Notes

Did I research what the weather was like in 1978? Yes, I did. Did I spend half an hour sorting through all known potions' ingredients in cannon to find appropriate ones for the Drink of Despair? Yes, I did. I also researched phases of the moon in 1977-78 for Remus and the exact weekdays for each year I was writing in. My sibling thinks I should be a fact-checker.

Douglas McGregor is an actual character JK mentioned in McGonagall's backstory on Pottermore, and he and his family did lose their lives to Death Eaters in the first war. The son of the Winger family — Talbott — is a character in Hogwarts Mystery. Apparently, he only escaped when Death Eaters came after his family because he was an unregistered Animagus.

Never Tickle a Sleeping Dragon

Chapter Summary

> My body is a cage
> That keeps me from dancing with the one I love
> But my mind holds the key
> — My Body Is a Cage, Arcade Fire

Chapter Notes

> CW: intoxicated straight, cis-gender men talking like your least favourite intoxicated straight, cis-gender men, and implied/referenced non-con/rape.

In the year 1979, Regulus Black would drown, Orion Black, too, would die, Hermione Granger and Theodore Nott would both be born, James Potter and Lily Evans would be married, as would Frank Longbottom and Alice Fortescue, Fleamont and Euphemia Potter would succumb to Dragon Pox, and Gilderoy Lockhart would find out that he did not, in fact, make Prefect.

Obviously, not in that order.

The number of anti-Muggle attacks increased still in the new year, more and more surfacing in *The Daily Prophet* each week. Some Death Eaters used the harsh winter to their advantage by leaving people to freeze to death outside with their feet stuck to the ground with Sticking Charms, dropping them into a frozen lake before resealing the ice, or placing them in a Full-Body Bind and burying them beneath the snowfall.

This was the world Hermione would be bringing her son into, and when February came and went and she failed to get her period, she knew that there was no changing this.

“Mistress Mione is late,” Dinky said on the first of March, their voice a disconcerting combination of hopeful and greedy. They were standing just beside Hermione in the conservatory, setting her breakfast tray down on the table. “Sixteen days, Dinky is counting. I thinks Mistress Mione might finally be having Dinky’s Master’s heir in her belly.”

“I think so, too, Dinky,” Hermione murmured. She gazed down at her breakfast, rubbing her temple tiredly. The eggs smelt fine, which was extremely appreciated; she hadn’t stood the smell when she had been pregnant with Hugo. “I will tell Tavaris once I’m finished. He can cast the spell to confirm.”

“Mistress Mione had better,” said Dinky in a low voice, “or Dinky be doing it for her. Master Tavaris is being in his study now — Mistress Mione be finding him there.” They puffed out their chest, suddenly beaming with pride. “Dinky raises new heir. Oh, what honour is being bestowed on Dinky!”

“A baby,” Hermione corrected sharply. “Not an heir, *a baby*. He’s more than just a continuation of this house and I’ll thank you for treating him as such.”

“A boy!” they exclaimed, ecstatic, bouncing on the spot. “A true Nott heir; a noble son for Master Tavaris!”

Hermione sighed, giving up, and dug into her breakfast. She ate slowly, not out of fear that she may be sick, but to stall. When her plate was clean and the remains of her pot of tea had gone cold, she took a deep breath and got to her feet. Her voice wavered slightly when she said, “I’ll be right back, Crookshanks.”

Crookshanks was snuggled up to the potted fern, but, as though sensing her nerves, he rose and trotted over to be picked up.

Holding him closely, she left the conservatory, passed through the formal dining room, and walked down the hall towards Tavaris’ study. The darkness of the hall felt foreboding, and it did nothing to soothe her nerves.

Hermione hesitated outside the door.

“I knew this would happen,” she whispered to Crookshanks. “Silly to be nervous, isn’t it?”

Silly to be talking to her cat, too, but that was an issue for another day. With another deep breath, she straightened her posture, schooled her expression, raised her chin, and entered the study.

Sat at his desk, Tavaris was drinking a cup of tea as he scanned a copy of the *Prophet* that lay open before him. On the front page of the latter, she could make out the headline: *MINCHUM AUTHORISES ADDITIONAL DEMENTORS AT AZKABAN*.

Tavaris’ expression was grave, or perhaps plainly annoyed. Either way, it was gone a second after she stepped inside; he tore his eyes from the article to look up, and raised an eyebrow at her, bemused by her presence.

Hermione sat herself on one of the two upholstered chairs before his desk. “Good morning,” she said, in a too-high voice.

He glanced out the window, through which the beginnings of a blizzard could be glimpsed, and looked back at her, both eyebrows now raised.

She decided to skip to the point.

“I’m late,” she said. “Sixteen days so, according to Dinky. I hadn’t realised they were keeping track, but I suppose I should’ve expected it. I could’ve confirmed myself if I’d had a

wand but —" She exhaled shakily, forcing herself to pet Crookshanks in an effort to stay calm. "So — the spell. Will you cast it?"

For a long moment in which she could feel her heart rising into her throat, Tavaris only stared.

And then a smile crept slowly across his face, his eyes lighting up. The next moment, he was out of his seat and drawing his wand, Crookshanks hopping off her lap as he rounded the desk, not even picking up his walking-stick. Tavaris turned the second chair to face her and sat back down, his wand aimed at her stomach. He seemed to be holding his breath; so was she.

"*Quaerere Utero*," he whispered, and a second later, Hermione's entire abdomen was awash with a pulsating, pearlescent glow. He gave a soft laugh, gazing at it in wonder, then dispelled the charm with a silent incantation and casted another. "*Foetus Genus*."

No light appeared this time, but Hermione knew it would not; it was far too early to decipher the sex, all future knowledge aside. She was indeed pregnant, though.

With a breathless shout of glee, Tavaris sprung to his feet, which must have hurt, although he didn't seem to notice just then. He grabbed Hermione's head and forcefully planted a kiss on top of it, unbothered by how she immediately jerked away, shuddering.

"This is *brilliant* news," he said. "An heir! At last! Too soon to tell the gender, of course, but I'm certain it'll be a boy, my line has always proved fortunate in that regard. *Fuck*. The Dark Lord will be so pleased — an excellent addition to his forces our son will one day be."

Hermione began to splutter in outrage, but Tavaris ignored her, limping yet grinning nonetheless as he hurried back round his desk and got out parchment and a quill.

"The rest of the family must be alerted," he said as he wrote, the speed with which he did so startling, "and such a perfect opportunity it is for you to meet them — the birth of the next Lord Nott. It's not often we get together, you know, but I should think this calls for celebration. A party, yes — it's traditional — and I'll let you plan it yourself. It's high time you learned, anyhow. Evangeline and Narcissa will help you." He laughed abruptly, as though something funny had just occurred to him. Triumphant, he added, "If they can overcome their jealousy, that is."

"Where do the other Notts live," inquired Hermione, curious, "if not at that other property you mentioned to me?"

"Well, Theomund and Tate and their lot live in Berlin," said Tavaris, signing off and grabbing a second piece of parchment. "Rawdon and Aleena and their daughter live in Athens, but they've been travelling; last I heard, they were in Rome. Their son, Barnett, is in Bordeaux with his wife — can never fucking remember her name, they were married only five or so years ago. I shall have to check, especially since you'll also need to know it."

She swallowed nervously. She did not think she was fully equipped to deal with a surplus of Notts.

“When will this party take place?” she asked.

“Once our son is born,” he said, “to properly welcome him into the family and give everyone a chance to meet the future Lord of House Nott. So that’ll be in —” he paused, seeming to count in his head, “— November? For now, however, I shall just have Abraxas and Edmund over, and I suppose Elias and Geoffrey. Perhaps Cygnus. Dinky!” he added, signing off on the second letter.

In an instant, Dinky had appeared beside him, beaming no less proudly than they had earlier, and immediately swept into a deep bow.

“Dinky be congratulating Master Tavaris on producing his heir. So proud, Dinky is, to be serving such a noble house!”

“Yes, thank you, Dinky,” Tavaris said distractedly, handing Dinky the two letters. “Send these off for me, and then get out a bottle of Beau Champagne to be chilled for this evening — the nineteen-sixty-eight. Prepare dinner for … mm … yes, six — no, seven. We’ll eat in the formal dining room.”

“Seven?” said Hermione, with a frown. “It’s Saturday. Won’t Snape be here, too?”

“Eight, then,” Tavaris told Dinky, who nodded and left the room, muttering excitedly to themselves about what meal to prepare. Tavaris turned back to Hermione, grabbing another piece of parchment. “I’ve invited Evangeline and Narcissa over tomorrow. I’ve a hearing I need to be present for, so it will just be the three of you. It’s time you learnt the role of Lady Nott. They will teach you what you need to know.”

Hermione was already dreading it.

“It’s a common practice among families like our own to hire a tutor for one’s children,” Tavaris continued, holding his quill aloft, “but that’s not how things are done by House Nott. We prefer to teach them ourselves to avoid running the risk of their young, impressionable minds being tainted by those with *modern* ideas. That is not to say it’s impossible to find a like-minded tutor, but, as I say, we prefer to retain our authority over the knowledge our children are afforded. Frankly, I think hiring a tutor is lazy, so obviously the Malfoys do it.”

He chuckled at his own joke, then waved his quill dismissively, as though telling her to disregard it.

“With how busy I am, this task will fall on you, and there is much you need to learn before you can teach our son.”

It took great effort for Hermione not to slump in relief at the news that Tavaris planned on keeping her around after Theodore was born. Even so, it left her somewhat wary, because she no longer had any idea when she might stop being useful to him. When would the opportunity to escape arise if he continued to keep her here?

“I’ll give you a list of books to fetch from the library.”

“I beg your pardon?” she squeaked.

Tavaris smirked.

“I wondered how long it would take you to find it,” he said. “I presume Crookshanks led the way? Clever creature. Don’t feel too badly about yourself, darling, even without his help I’m sure you would have found it — you know, eventually.”

Hermione didn’t understand why she was not in trouble.

“How did you know? How did you know that I’d found it?” She had not left anything out of place; in fact, she had been very careful to only visit the library when he wasn’t home, and to leave no trace of her presence behind. Within a second, she realised what had likely happened. “It was Dinky, wasn’t it? They knew I’d been in there.”

“Why not, darling,” said Tavaris, not giving her a straight answer. He dipped his quill in ink, and a minute later, set it aside and handed over a sharply scrawled list. “Go on up to fetch these titles before Severus arrives. It’ll give you something to do today other than laze about or desperately listen in on lessons to keep your mind from collapsing in on itself.”

Hermione grabbed the list, glowering.

“My mind is not at risk of collapsing,” she snapped, standing up. She went up to the bookcase, huffing angrily, and pulled on the red leather-bound book on the fifth shelf; the bookcase split apart to let her into the passageway, and she ascended the stairs without another word, Crookshanks at her heels.

The books on the list were not easy to find due to the library’s mess of overflowing shelves and towering stacks. Once she had finally managed to collect all six, she left, wishing that she could have Levitated them.

Twenty minutes later, dressed for the day and sitting on the blue sofa in the lady’s parlour with another pot of tea, Hermione laid out the books. Together, they made up a series she had heard referenced once or twice before in the future; it was called *Ancient Wizarding Traditions* and, as Orion Black had bragged, had been written by Misapinoa Black in 1865. The *Ladyship* and *Etiquette* editions had been among the books in Hermione’s bedroom to be set on fire in August; a crime against books everywhere, but she had been trying to prove a point. Still quite bitter about the blatantly sexist display that had been her bookcase, she started with *Politics Edition*.

It was almost funny how a book could manage to fascinate, disgust, and incense her all at once. There was plenty of information that she already knew from her own political career, but Misapinoa’s writing provided insight on many things that had once aggravated her, particularly in the Wizengamot; it turned out that there were certain protocols in place among the pure-blood seat-holders for all manner of occasions.

For example, when one disagreed with any form of legislature proposed by a lord with whom one shared an alliance, they were instructed to seek them out to discuss it privately; publicly opposing them was an insult to their house and had been known to cause centuries-long

disputes. Misapinoa noted that in 1783, Lord Armand Malfoy II proposed the Muggle-Born Entrance Act, which would have kept any Muggle-borns unwilling to leave the Muggle world entirely behind — by being taken in by a wizarding household and allowing their parents to be Obliviated — from attending Hogwarts. The Bill was loudly protested by Lord Septimus Weasley I, resulting in a perfectly legal duel that left Armand blind in one eye, Septimus (along with any future Weasleys) without their titles, and a feud between their two families that remained to that day. The Bill, thankfully, had not passed.

Protocol called for the two lords to attempt to reach a settlement, and if they could not, then the lord proposing the disagreed-upon action would essentially have to bribe the other into agreement by offering up a daughter for marriage, paying a hefty sum of gold, or promising, in writing, a favour that could be collected upon at any time, the latter of which could even be passed down multiple generations if a lord decided to save it, and the future head of the other house would have no choice but to go along with it.

It explained a lot to Hermione. After all, she could not count how many times a bill that had been presented to the Wizengamot had been unable to pass due to someone being suspiciously silent on their opinion, only for them to suddenly and vehemently agree or disagree the following session. The oldest of pure-blood houses all had their own seat to be passed down from lord to lord, whilst the other seats were filled by those in notable positions within Magical Law Enforcement or the Minister's Office, and by those who had been awarded them for great political feats — like Professor Dumbledore, for his defeat of Gellert Grindelwald. These seats could not be inherited.

And as for the lady of a pure-blood house, she could only become a member of the Wizengamot if her husband had passed away and his male successors were all underage. This, too, Hermione had known. Alongside Augusta Longbottom, who had served for nearly a decade before her grandson had come of age and whom Neville had then consistently and somewhat legally sent as his proxy, Hermione had tried many times to contest this rule, and they had failed, continuously.

It was noon when she finished reading, and Crookshanks had vanished at some point without her noticing, likely to return to his beloved fern. Dinky delivered lunch and Hermione ate it as she moved on to the next book: *Rituals Edition*.

She had barely gotten through the introduction before she realised that she was going to need notes; she hastily crossed the hall to retrieve the necessary supplies from the desk in her bedroom, then settled back in, allowing herself to be swept up into an act she had sorely missed: studying.

By the time the sun had set, the blizzard hitting its peak of nastiness, Hermione had three feet of notes on pure-blood politics and another two feet on common rituals that were now largely illegal. They were used — both the legal and otherwise — for Yule, Imbolc, the Spring Equinox, Beltane, the Summer Solstice, Lammas, the Autumn Equinox, and Samhain, and she wondered why Tavaris had not forced her to participate in any of them thus far. She almost wished that he had; they seemed rather interesting.

There were several rituals, however, that were not created for one of the Paganistic holidays, but instead designed for milestones such as marriage, birth, coming of age, and death. The

vows she had recited in her sham of a wedding to Tavaris were among the many that were listed in Misapinoa's book, and apparently made it so that divorce was not an option. Time-travel would likely do the trick, though, so Hermione wasn't too concerned. Besides, if she ran into any problems upon returning to the future, she could just enlist a few Unspeakables to help her sort it out — now their work was fun to study; one of the many privileges of being Minister for Magic.

At half-past six, Dinky returned to take Hermione's lunch tray and tell her to prepare for dinner; she reluctantly put down *Celebrations Edition* and went to pick out an evening gown. In the past, or really the future, getting ready for a formal event had meant having her measurements sent out weeks in advance, spending what should have been a break for lunch stood on a footstool in her office whilst any necessary adjustments had been made, and then, on the day, either engaging in a fierce battle of wills with her hair or paying someone to do it for her. Since it had been Transfigured from curly but mostly just bushy to straight and sleek, and by the Elder Wand, no less, hair maintenance was a non-issue. If there was any one thing that she appreciated about her unfortunate time-travel mishap, it was this; none of her other dangerous and seemingly impossible adventures had involved frizz-free hair. Now, in readying herself, all she did was brush it, and whilst it was dry, even.

The beauty products at the vanity were all wizarding, kept in small jars and glinting vials of coloured glass. Not for the first time, she was unsettled by how perfectly the products matched her skin tone; she had not been the one to pick them out. Similarly, everything in the wardrobe was to her measurements, and she did not know how or when those had been obtained. These clothes were tailored, and with how extensive the collection was, it had taken far longer than a fortnight to have it made. Tonight, she chose an indigo velvet gown with cape sleeves, for its comfort and warmth, and wondered who had placed the order for everything. She felt quite confident in the suspicion that it had been Narcissa Malfoy.

The clock had only just struck seven when Hermione descended to the ground floor for dinner. Already, she wished to crawl into bed; every day, she seemed to get more and more tired.

Tavaris stood near the front doors with Snape, cheerfully greeting Abraxas, Edmund, the elder Mulciber and Avery, and Cygnus Black as Dinky vanished with a hefty armful of cloaks damp from snow. Congratulatory words were given, and backs were patted proudly, as if one's friend successfully knocking up his wife was a point of pride.

Snape could not seem to stop smoothing out his robes.

"Ah, here, she is! The mother of my heir." Tavaris looked a little smug. "Drinks first, gentlemen?"

"Please," Cygnus said heavily, and they made their way into the sitting room with a silent Snape trailing after them. It seemed automatic that Abraxas and Edmund so swiftly sat down on the sofa that faced Cantankerus' portrait, while Avery and Mulciber claimed the one opposite. Cygnus and Snape had to think first, the former shortly and the latter for a tense several seconds.

"Have you been well, Lady Nott?" asked Abraxas.

Hermione suspected the sole reason anyone called her that title was to mock her; she lowered herself onto the adjacent loveseat, next to Snape, and did not answer apart from glaring.

“Been sitting in the cellar for quite some time, this one,” said Tavaris, picking up a bottle of champagne from the drink cart.

Cygnus peered at the label.

“A good year,” he determined.

“Indeed,” said Abraxas, beside him. His expression was darkly amused. “Nineteen-sixty-eight,” he added to the others, and Edmund, Mulciber, and Avery all promptly laughed.

Just then, Dinky returned with a *pop*, and Tavaris opened the bottle of champagne with one twice as loud; the cork shot across the room to hit a previously grinning Cantankerus in the face. Grinning, Tavaris filled six flutes held out by Dinky, who then handed them out; Hermione declined, so Tavaris claimed himself a second.

“To the future of House Nott!” he toasted, raising his first flute, and the rest echoed his words before they all took their first sips of the night.

Everyone apart from Hermione and Snape was drunk before they even sat down for dinner.

It had not taken long for Hermione to memorise the stages of Tavaris’ drunkenness, and it appeared that his closest friends behaved very much the same. After one drink, they would begin to brag about themselves, which typically involved describing their most prized possessions and impressive achievements at great length. By the second drink, they turned into busy-bodies; throughout the first course, they all gossiped to no end. Because of the occasion, this meant gossiping about those whose heirs had proven to be massive disappointments, namely Orion and Walburga Black’s.

“We all knew it was coming,” Cygnus told them when Avery brought up Sirius’ disownment. “It was only a matter of time. My sister claims it was the Potter boy’s influence, but Sirius was sorted into Gryffindor all on his own.”

“And Andromeda?” said Abraxas. “You cannot honestly say you saw *that* coming.”

Cygnus sighed wearily.

“No, I cannot say that I did. She was perfect, truly perfect; beautiful, intelligent … made it into Slytherin no problem, achieved high marks on every exam — *nine* O.W.L.s, she scored, and eight N.E.W.T.s — and she was a prefect, too! Then all of a sudden, Narcissa tells me she’s engaged to a Mudblood, and I go to Andromeda’s room to find her already gone.”

“They’ve a daughter now, Regulus told me,” said Tavaris. “She’s — what — six, now?”

Hermione refolded the napkin in her lap to hide the tremble in her hands.

“Nymphadora,” said Cygnus darkly. “A traditional Black name, and a cruel joke.”

Then, on their third drinks, they began complaining about their respective fathers.

“A Stinging Hex to the bottom if I ever spoke out of turn!” Edmund said hotly, gesturing with his knife. “The bastard left me with a perpetually swollen arse!”

“You think the state of *your* arse was poor?” Cygnus scoffed, while Mulciber guffawed loudly. “I was raised by Blacks!”

“My father once decided I spent too much time focused on Quidditch,” Abraxas glowered, “and he Jinxed my broomstick to shock me every time I mounted it. You two may have had swollen arses, but mine was fucking purple!”

“That’s because you were stupid enough to keep riding it,” Tavaris pointed out. “Now, *my* father used to have me recite the names of our family tree all the way back to Theomund Nott the First — the first Nott to step foot in Britain, back when the Anglo-Saxons arrived. I had to write it out once for every mistake I made, and he made me use a Blood Quill to do it until he realised that he’d be scarring his own heir.”

“If you so much as *consider* using a Blood Quill on our son, I’ll free you of your injured leg by slicing it off in your sleep,” Hermione put in. “I hear they make excellent prosthetics these days.”

There was a long silence, then Edmund, Avery, and Mulciber all roared with laughter.

“That —” Edmund pointed at Hermione, “— is precisely the sort of mother a wizard wants for his child.”

Snape kept his silence. Hermione did not blame him; any mention of his Muggle father would be unwelcomed, even if his stories rivalled their own. By four drinks, though, he easily rejoined the conversation, for four drinks meant discussing (mainly praising) the Dark Lord. It did not, however, go well for him.

“Ah, Severus, I meant to tell you,” Tavaris said, swallowing a bite of duck; “the Dark Lord followed through on your request. He offered your Mudblood a place in his ranks.”

“No!” exclaimed Cygnus, in alarm. “A Mudblood?”

Hermione turned her head, incredulous.

“How could you *possibly* be thick enough to believe Lily would ever agree to becoming a *Death Eater*?”

Snape sneered at her.

“You spend a measly few months in her company and believe you know her better than I?”

“Obviously, she does, Severus,” said Tavaris, “because the offer was turned down.”

This time, it was Snape who turned his head.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You heard correctly. The Dark Lord was even so generous as to make the Potter boy an offer as well.”

“Haven’t you heard?” Abraxas asked Snape. “Those two have gotten themselves engaged.” He wrinkled his nose, disgusted by this fact.

“Yes, Esther mentioned,” said Avery, looking equally repulsed. “Euphemia Potter made an announcement at the last meeting of the Ladies’ Tea Society. Seemed awfully chuffed about it, apparently.”

Snape had gone very pale.

“Engaged?” he said. “As in …”

“To be married?” supplied Mulciber, slowly and condescendingly, leering at him from across the table. “*Yes* … and to each other, too, if you can believe it.”

Avery sniggered.

“Potter declined the offer as well, you know. Quite vehemently, I’m told,” Tavaris carried on casually, pausing only to take a sip of the wine Dinky had brought out when they had run out of champagne. “Had a few choice words to say, that boy. The Dark Lord had to teach him and his new fiancée a little lesson on respecting their betters.”

“Filth like them, I doubt it stuck,” muttered Abraxas.

“What sort of lesson?” asked Hermione fearfully.

“Well, I wouldn’t call it a *duel*, exactly …”

Snape gulped loudly.

“You *idiot*!” she snapped at him. “They could’ve been killed!”

“Never fear, boy,” said Cygnus sagely, “you shall find a new woman — and a purer one, at that.”

“No doubt he’ll still mourn the loss of her cunt,” said Avery.

Snape’s hands shook ever so slightly as he sliced off a piece of roasted duck; savagely, Hermione hoped he would accidentally cut himself.

Edmund gave a wistful sigh and took a sip of his fifth drink, then — because the fifth drink always meant discussing sex — he said, “There are some things Mudbloods are willing to do that pure-blood witches simply aren't.”

Hermione wanted to hex them all.

“Remember that Hufflepuff with that perpetual blush condition?” asked Abraxas. He snapped his fingers, as if to summon the answer. “Oh, what was her name?”

“Claudia,” said Avery. He snorted. “I certainly gave her something to blush at. You should have seen the look on her face when she pulled down my trousers for the first time.” He made his voice high and girlish. “‘How am I to fit that in my mouth, Eli?’”

Mulciber howled, and Abraxas laughed so hard he choked on his next sip of wine and had to be slapped on the back by Edmund.

“She was your first, was she not, Elias?” said Tavaris, and Avery nodded. “Mine was —”

“Charlotte Peterson,” Abraxas rasped, reaching for his water goblet. “The Ravenclaw with the scar on her lip.”

“That’s right,” said Cygnus, as though remembering. “My late cousin Charis nearly lost her mind because of that girl, fearing her firstborn might sully the Crouch bloodline with a half-blood. This was a few years before Bartemius found Winifred, mind.”

“Twisted bastard,” Avery grinned at Tavaris over the rim of his goblet. “You’ve always had a thing for scars, haven’t you?”

Tavaris smirked, his eyes glinting deviously.

“Mione’s got quite the scar on her, you know,” he said lightly, and Hermione felt her face grow hot. “A thick, jagged, purple thing; it goes all the way from the bottom-right of her ribcage to the underside of her left tit.”

“Is that so?” Edmund sounded intrigued. He leered at her. “Mind showing us, sweetheart?”

She decided then that she did not want to linger to witness the effects of drink six, nor seven, eight, and nine, for that matter; she shoved her chair back, mortified, vibrating with rage as she stood.

“I bet your arse is scarred from all those Stinging Hexes,” Hermione told Edmund nastily. “Your wife probably has to try not to *gag* every time she looks at it.” With that, she stormed out of the room, the laughter of seven men ringing in her ears.

It was easy to ignore the truth of what Tavaris did to her when she had no memory of it, but his detailed description of the scar that Antonin Dolohov had left on her when she was sixteen years old was proof enough to haunt her — that, and the fact that she was now pregnant. Still, she had known the pregnancy was coming; it was knowing that Tavaris had spent so much time intimately getting to know her naked body that made her feel so violated.

The mornings on which she woke exactly how he had left her were terrible enough, but to this, she had grown accustomed. She could think about it logically: this is what he had done, and this is why he had done it. She had not, however, let herself think of what else he might have done: how exactly he might have touched her, what sort of sounds he might have made,

or what sort of things he might have said, how long he might have spent simply studying her as she lay there asleep …

It made Hermione sick.

She turned into her bedroom, bolted into the ensuite, and dropped to her knees in front of the toilet, raising the lid just in time.

There were countless curse words that Hermione would not hesitate to reprimand her children for repeating, but none that felt as vile as this one. It was not necessarily a bad word, but rather an honest one, yet she could hardly think it, let alone speak it. Every time she tried — and she tried often, for she knew that such unwillingness was a form of repression — something would clog her throat, shoving the word back down.

I was —

She could not do it. Only a faint outline of the word appeared in her head, and she could not allow it to take form. Perhaps doing so would make it more real, but did she really need to repeat the word for it to be real, when the evidence of it was slowly growing inside of her?

I was —

Why couldn't she let herself admit it? What was she so afraid of? It was only four letters; it began with "R," then came an "A," and then —

She vomited again.

Pathetic, Hermione thought, as she wiped her chin on the back of her hand, but even whilst thinking it, she knew that this was not the case. The word *victim* came to mind, but it felt wrong somehow, as if it were untrue. She imagined confiding in someone that she was a victim only to have them point out that she had willingly drunk more than two-dozen Sleeping Draughts, knowing what it meant to do so, and therefore she had clearly consented.

Dinner had tasted better going down than it did coming back up.

Crookshanks had come to lay on the floor beside her and, when she was confident that she was done puking, Hermione curled up next to him, the cool tiles like a soothing balm against her overheated skin.

"How am I to tell him, Crooks?" she asked in a whisper, her throat raw. "How am I to tell my son that he was only born because his father —?" She broke off, feeling her face crumple. Tears slid over the bridge of her nose and along her cheekbone to land on the floor. "*Why*? Why did it have to be *me*?"

Crookshanks did not answer her, but he did move closer, snuggling right up against her chest, and that was good enough.

*

Looking back, Hermione thought it would have been a better idea to start with the *Etiquette* and *Ladyship* editions of the *Ancient Wizarding Traditions* series, for she found herself woefully unprepared for the combined tutelage of Evangeline and Narcissa Malfoy.

"The running and expanding of a household is the lady's primary responsibility," Evangeline informed Hermione, prim and strict. "That Tavaris was forced to organise his own birthday dinner is outrageous! He even selected the menu, and that is just not done. You must understand that these are things he oughtn't have to concern himself with."

"One's husband already has enough on his plate without needing to worry about the day-to-day running of his household," Narcissa said in a calmer yet equally condescending approach. "He has a role to play, with his career and, as a lord, in the wizarding community at large."

"Indeed, and Tavaris has spent far too long managing this house all by himself. He requires a partner."

"The term *partner* implies we're equal," Hermione said flatly.

Evangeline and Narcissa exchanged a small, musical laugh, before they both looked back at Hermione with matching smirks.

"Oh, but you are," said Narcissa.

"All ladies are equal to their lords," said Evangeline, "just as all wives are equal to their husbands; it just so happens that very few men are aware of it."

"You have more power here than you realise, Mione. You just need to woman up and take it."

Never in her wildest dreams did Hermione think that she would ever be told to "woman up," least of all by Narcissa Malfoy, but then she remembered Ethel and all that she could have done in her position, had she wanted to, and realised that they were right.

Be that as it may, Hermione was not being underestimated here; Tavaris knew perfectly well what she was capable of — it was the reason she had been brought to him in the first place — so she did not think any of this supposed power pertained to her.

She sunk deeper into the sofa cushions, too tired to keep herself upright, and idly ran her hand through Crookshanks fur as he rested on her lap. Narcissa and Evangeline sat on the opposite sofa in the lady's parlour, each of them with a cup of tea; Hermione's own cup was growing cold on the coffee table between them.

"The lady of a house is her lord's eyes and ears," Narcissa went on, apparently either unbothered or unaware that Hermione was paying her little attention. "Much can be discovered from observing and listening to the other wives as they gossip. Secrets are not uncovered by men, but rather whispered to them by their wives. A high tea or a charity event is the perfect way to pick up on the sort of scandalous information one's husband can then use to achieve his ends. After all, who knows one's worst qualities better than one's wife? A

displeased wife may let slip a few things she oughtn't be sharing when there's no men in the room."

"Of course, none of this is anything *you* will ever need to bother yourself with," said Evangeline snootily, "considering your … ah … *confinement*. What *you* need to worry about is raising that heir in your belly."

"Every lady is responsible for raising and teaching her children — the children of her peers, too, at times, should they have a *fuller* calendar. Let us focus on that for now. Besides," Narcissa added, nodding at the copy of *Ancient Wizarding Traditions: Ladyship Edition* that lay on the coffee table, "half of that book doesn't even apply to you."

"Then we shall move on to planning celebrations." Evangeline shook her head, nearly scowling, but not quite. "If I hear Tavaris has created his own menu *one more time* …"

Hermione tuned them both out; it was not that she was lacking in patience that day, but rather that she could simply not convince herself to be interested in anything anyone had to say. From the moment she had woken up, she had known that this was not going to be one of her better days; even the night before, she had known, as she had picked herself up off the bathroom floor.

There was no power to be had here. She might as well have been weighed down by a ball and chain — a thought that made her lips twist ruefully; "the old ball and chain," the phrase went, and it was ironic in this circumstance.

How could Hermione take advantage of this so-called power Evangeline and Narcissa claimed to possess when she could only interact with whomever Tavaris permitted her to? Worse, they all thought her a joke — powerful enough for the Dark Lord to recruit, powerful enough to take most of them out with ease, yet reduced to a housewife who was, in truth, little more than a prisoner. The newly graduated and recruited Death Eaters that came by each week did not fear her and Hermione suspected that the Dark Lord merely found her amusing, because they all knew she couldn't do anything to stop them; all she could do was run her mouth, and what harm could come from that?

Absently, she rubbed her forearm, unmarred. She still had Dolohov's mark, as well as a barely visible line on the right side of her face from the Whomping Willow when she had been fourteen, but that was it. None of the scars she had gotten past her first month of being eighteen had presented themselves: no line across her throat or unevenly sliced letters on her forearm, both from Bellatrix's dagger, nor any mottled patches of skin on her hands, neck, and chest from the cursed objects in Bellatrix's vault at Gringotts. Next dancing her fingers across the back of her other hand, she felt nothing but smooth skin, rather than any lumps, and she recalled how painful it had been to have those fresh burns rubbing against the scales of the dragon.

Suddenly, an idea came to her. Hermione straightened up. They really were alike now, she and that dragon; both of them chained in place, unable to escape the darkness of their new home, forced into submission, except the goblins had required those barbaric clankers in order to pass the dragon, because even though it had been chained and blinded, it had still been a dragon.

Perhaps Hermione was unarmed, and perhaps she was trapped, but she could still remind them what would happen if she were not; she could let them reassure themselves with the fact that she could not fight back, yet know all the same that she would win if ever given the opportunity.

Potentia in Silentio was the motto of House Nott — *Power in Silence* — but this was not her house, and that was not her motto; she was a Gryffindor, one of the four noble houses of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and her motto was, *Draco Dormiens Nunquam Titillandus.*

Never Tickle a Sleeping Dragon.

Across from her, Narcissa and Evangeline were still talking, now about how to ensure one's children were taught the proper etiquette for a witch or wizard of their standing prior to being introduced into society, and they seemed to take Hermione's abrupt alertness as a sign that she was listening attentively. She was, truthfully, but not for the reasons they thought.

"A man is often without the quality of mind to realise when his home requires brightening; it is the presence of a wife that brings light into his space," Narcissa explained a while later, opening a thick, lavender book titled, *Flores et Significationes*. "Decorative flowers are the easiest way to do that. Now, personally, I think dianthus is an exemplary choice for the fall season …"

Hermione started small.

"I'd like for the curtains to be drawn back from now on," she told Dinky the following morning, standing before the front doors, the hall almost entirely submerged in darkness despite the early hour. "It's far too grim in here, don't you think?"

Dinky made an odd, considering face, glancing at the curtain-covered windows out of the corner of their eye as though they didn't want to be caught judging them.

"Dinky is not questioning Master Tavaris' wishes," they said after a moment. "If Dinky's masters wish for dark, Dinky hides the light and puts out the fire."

Trying not to hate herself, Hermione said, "Well, your mistress would like some light and so will the new heir of House Nott. Besides, I'd like to add some greenery somewhere other than the conservatory and the plants will need sunshine to grow, won't they? I'm no expert on gardening, truth be told, but you're the one who maintains the other plants, aren't you?"

"Yes, Mistress, Dinky is keeping all the plants healthy for Master Tavaris," said Dinky, nodding rapidly. "Dinky knows they is needing sunshine to grow, and Dinky thinks the new heir be needing it, too. I takes care of everything, Mistress."

Hermione put on a grateful smile.

"Thank you, Dinky. I hope you know how greatly I appreciate your efforts."

Dinky was still nodding, now looking distractedly from window to window and candelabrum to candelabrum. Their already large eyes had widened and taken on a slightly manic gleam. She could practically see the ideas swirling about within their head.

“Which plants is Mistress Mione wanting Dinky to obtain for her?”

This time, Hermione’s smile was genuine.

“Lilies. Lots and lots of lilies. Oh, and,” she added in an afterthought, “what petunias would you suppose are best suited for fall?”

When Snape arrived the following Sunday, Hermione beat Dinky to the doors; she opened them with a smile that bordered on a smirk, and this alone had him eyeing her warily.

“Do come in, Severus,” she said pleasantly, stepping back to permit him entrance. “It’s far too cold out to keep standing on the steps. Dinky, would you please take our guest’s cloak?”

Snape’s eyes, now narrowed in suspicion, did not leave her as he stepped inside, nor as he slipped off his snow-flaked cloak for Dinky to take, but when they finally did, drifting to take in the sight of the front hall, they widened in surprise.

Sunlight flooded in through the windows that bracketed the doors; a chandelier, brought over from the other Nott property, hung from the ceiling; and just past the doors to the formal dining room was a long, narrow end table, on which a large antique vase sat, full of orange and golden-rayed lilies.

“Tavaris awaits you in his study,” Hermione said, and Snape turned his gaze on her once more, his jaw clenched and a pink tinge high up on his cheekbones. “Well? Go on, Severus. I’d have thought you wouldn’t want to miss even a second of the knowledge your dear Dark Lord has so graciously made accessible to you.”

He didn’t say anything, clearly conscious of the fact that nothing he could possibly say in that moment would do him any good; showing any degree of offence would prove how much something as simple as a few flowers had affected him. With his lips pressed together and his teeth grinding audibly, he turned on his heel and strode down the hall towards Tavaris’ study, oozing false confidence.

At dinner that evening, Snape managed to force down only half of his meal, his gaze constantly returning to the white madonna-lily and prism-petunia centrepiece.

“Malfoy Manor has stood for centuries,” Evangeline had told Hermione over lunch, taken in the conservatory where Crookshanks, as usual, was cuddling the fern, “and whilst its exterior has changed very little, the interior has been altered with every new generation. New Malfoys marry into the family and it’s common for them to add their own touch. From the wallpaper to the furniture, to the artwork that hangs in every room — the lady of a house can change it all to suit the image she and her lord wish their family to project.”

On the southside of Diagon Alley, there was a small shop called *Rafferty’s Reliable Rugs*, where one could go to purchase or commission mats, carpets, and rugs of all kinds. The pale

Persian rug that had laid in the middle of the sitting room in Hermione and Ron's London townhouse had been bought there. In mid-March, she sent Dinky to the shop with a letter describing precisely what she wanted made: a sage-green stair-runner with a dark grey border and thin silver stitching. It arrived in the post two weeks later and she had it placed on the steps that led up to the library, the colours of which the runner matched perfectly. Tavaris even expressed his appreciation for the addition, but that was before he realised what, exactly, the stitching detailed.

Bellatrix, on the other hand, recognised it at once.

A singular design repeated itself along the middle of the runner, its thread incredibly fine, and it appeared, for the most part, to be nothing beyond random patterning. Alas, Bellatrix knew the design well, just as Hermione had known she would. When she arrived as scheduled at the end of the month, Tavaris had to lock Hermione in her bedroom — not as punishment, but to keep Bellatrix from tearing her head off.

The design was the Andromeda constellation.

"If one wishes certain rooms to feel more lived-in," Narcissa had said when Dinky had brought their afternoon tea, "leaving certain books or other media stacked on one or two surfaces is the best way to do it without making the room look untidy or disorganised. But think carefully about which books you select, for you must be sure they reveal only what you wish them to."

In April, Regulus and Barty Crouch Jr returned home for the Easter holidays to spend three whole days at the Nott Estate to catch up on their training, often with Rabastan Lestrange and Evan Rosier being dropped off by their fathers to join for a few hours. Hermione had spent the past month collecting numerous articles from the *Prophet* in preparation; she left them lying about the estate, face-up on nearly every available surface, and asked Dinky to leave them there until the boys left.

For those three days, Barty could not enter a single room without encountering a moving photograph of his father's skull-like face and toothbrush moustache.

A similar method was applied to both Edmund and Cygnus the next time they were both present for Thursday night drinks. Hermione took up residence on the sitting-room loveseat and began reading a new fiction novel Dinky had helped her order from Flourish and Blotts' April catalogue. She was only made to wait fifteen minutes before Abraxas, looking for an opportunity to take the mickey out of her, asked what the book was about.

"It's a romance," Hermione told him, holding it up so that all four men could see the title: *The Lady's Monster*; "it tells the story of the lady of a highly-esteemed pure-blood house falling for a werewolf. Her husband is the last of his bloodline and remains without an heir, but she's become so enraptured by this other man that she neglects to fulfil her duties, and his house is faced with the risk of collapse, sentenced to become nothing more than just another name in a history book few people even bother to read …"

She had not previously considered what Rodolphus' and Bellatrix's parents would think of the latter's devotion to the Dark Lord, but the look Edmund and Cygnus shared at that

moment was one she would treasure for years to come.

For Abraxas, Hermione cut out an advertisement from *Witch Weekly* on a potion which claimed to treat the damage caused by the repeated usage of Colour Change Charms on one's hair and slipped it into the pocket of his cloak for him to discover later on.

She could not come up with anything for Rabastan and Evan, nor any of the Averys and Mulcibers, but she continued to watch them, waiting for a weak spot to reveal itself. For Regulus, of course, she already had the necessary ammunition, but he was the only one she didn't want to hurt, emotionally or otherwise.

In the beginning, Hermione had worried that Tavaris would catch on and punish her for the little games that she was playing, but this was not the case. Had it been himself whom she was toying with, she knew he would have seen to it that she was taught a lesson on "disrespecting her betters," but, as it stood, she was not; therefore, he was not angry at all.

He was entertained.

Maybe this should have bothered Hermione — after all, she had not sought to bring Tavaris even a modicum of joy — but it didn't, partly because it kept her from getting in trouble and partly because she was starting to feel like herself again, and even his happiness could not bring her down from the high that gave her.

Between studying the *Ancient Wizarding Traditions* series, playing mind games with the Death Eaters, redecorating the estate, and watching her stomach slowly grow with every passing week, Hermione felt like she had a purpose again. It was a small one, nearly insignificant, and not one that she had ever really wanted for herself, but it was enough.

For now, this was enough.

The Fern

Chapter Summary

> Will you ever preserve?
> Will you ever exhume?
> Will you watch petals shed
> From flowers in bloom?
> Nothing can live up to promise
> Nothing can stop its narrative
> Nothing in place of catalysts
> And you'll never be pure again
> — Transgender, Crystal Castles

Chapter Notes

> CW: implied/referenced rape/non-con and minor character death(s) — sort of? They're minor in this story, anyway, but it's still sad.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By early May, Hermione had become significantly less fatigued, and her nausea seemed to have finally subsided. In the absence of these inconveniences, however, she was forced to deal with her stretch marks making a reappearance and her brassieres suddenly becoming two sizes too small, the latter of which put her in such a foul mood that she was prone to throwing somewhat mild tantrums whenever she wore one, regardless of whether Dinky readjusted it for her or not. Not long after that, she began craving treacle tart to an almost mindless degree, because, as it turned out, Theodore preferred it over any other food. She requested it for dessert every night and (much to Tavaris' amusement) sobbed the whole time she ate it, thinking of how much Harry, too, had loved it.

Tavaris was not very efficient in calming her during these mood swings — as in, he did not bother. She could not decide if this was any better than Ron's attempts to do so during her first two pregnancies. Normally, he had been good at keeping her calm; in fact, he had been one of the few people capable of it. When Hermione had gotten pregnant with Rose, however, she had developed an unfortunate habit of clinging to one of Ron's long limbs and refusing to let go one minute, and then threatening to hex him for even touching her the next. At times in which the latter occurred, he would often call for backup.

On one memorable occasion, when she had suffered a minor meltdown over her fear of not being able to keep up with her work while also being a good mother, he had called Harry

through the Floo, begging for assistance because she had screamed at him for saying that she had nothing to worry about. In the end, Harry had not been able to help her, either, and had made the executive decision to "bring in the big guns;" both Hermione's mother and Molly Weasley had promptly been summoned.

It sometimes felt like Hermione was losing her mind, despite knowing these fluctuations of mood were completely normal; she did not want to be within a foot of Tavaris, yet she craved physical affection like a lost man craved his home. Thankfully, Crookshanks dutifully left the fern to supply her with a steady flow of cuddles whenever she was in need of them. It was not the touch of a human, but it soothed her all the same.

On the morning of the fourth of June — a particularly sunny Monday — Hermione found herself sitting stock-still on her chair in the conservatory, her breakfast left untouched on the table before her. She could not tell if her heart was still beating, nor could she hear the occasional bristling, purring, and whining of the magical plants around her; the rest of the world had all but slipped away, the entirety of her focus now centred upon the moving photograph on the first page of the *Prophet*'s Society Section.

In a long, white dress, a lace veil draped over her hair and red tendrils dangling on either side of her face, was Lily. She was smiling up at Hermione, and had one hand raised to wave, which she then turned over to show off the gold band on her ring finger, inlaid with what appeared to be small rubies. Beside her stood James, who was wearing black dress robes with a golden-rayed lily pinned to one lapel, and he was smiling almost twice as brightly. He had one arm around Lily's waist, the other extended as he, too, waved. Even through the photograph, Hermione could sense the pride radiating from him. They were standing in a garden, a stream of sunlight beaming down on them, and she could not help but feel jealous.

Shameful, wasn't it? To be jealous of two people for enjoying their summer wedding when she knew they had no more than two summers left.

Hermione tore her eyes from the photograph only for them to find the band adorning her own ring finger; whereas Lily's was gold, hers was silver, and rather than a ruby, there was a large emerald, embedded in a circle of diamonds; it felt like an awfully Slytherin sort of ring. She still did not know what had become of the one Ron had given her. She tried not to wonder, but, of course, she did, nonetheless: had it been destroyed with a spell, broken to the point of being irreparable, tossed into a river, fed to a Venomous Tentacula, or was it hidden someplace she would never find it?

Why was it that people wondered most often about questions they didn't want the answers to? And why was this question one that she kept having to ask herself?

The headline printed above the photograph of Lily and James drew Hermione's gaze back to the *Prophet*. She had missed it before, her attention seized by the image itself rather than the article it accompanied.

FLEAMONT POTTER & WIFE CONTRACT DRAGON POX: SON RUSHES TO WED

One might think that a war causes the flames of love to fizzle out, left as dying embers that will not soon be forgotten, but will be abandoned all the same. Surprisingly, this is not the case; if anything, the prospect of death pushes us to act, to confess our feelings and to bind ourselves together whilst we still can. This past Saturday, surrounded by their friends and family, James Potter and Lily Evans did just that.

Potter and his new wife graduated from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry just last year, and they had begun dating less than six months prior to that point. On their one-year anniversary, both no older than eighteen, they became engaged. Their engagement was intended to be a long one, but as fate would have it, they were married two days ago on the second of June, at the still young age of nineteen. The reason for rushing their engagement is an understandable one: Potter's parents had both contracted Dragon Pox.

Potter's father, Fleamont, is best known for having developed Sleekeazy's Hair Potion following his own graduation from Hogwarts in 1926. By November of that same year, The Daily Prophet *printed an article speculating over how he had managed to successfully woo the arguably vain witches of America with his product. While it was an entirely different path from that of his own father, Lord Henry Potter — who sat on the Wizengamot until the time of his death in 1921 — Fleamont managed to quadruple the Potter family fortune with his product. This path he adored, and anyone who knew him would know that he did not take favourably to being called, "Lord."*

In August of 1929, Fleamont married his long-time sweetheart, Euphemia Potter, formerly McQuarrie. Although they lived a comfortable and prosperous life, they, like many wizarding folk today, struggled to reproduce. It was not until they had given up that Euphemia, at forty-nine, fell pregnant with their son James, who was born on the twenty-seventh of March of 1960. As their sole child — and what one might call a miracle — James was doted on. The three Potters were known to have been a tight-knit bunch, but this did not keep them from welcoming James' close friend Sirius Black into their family with open arms, when he left home at sixteen after being disowned by his family.

This past May, however, both Fleamont and Euphemia fell ill, having caught Dragon Pox on a trip to the island of Mont-Saint-Michel in Normandy, France, in celebration of their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Although Dragon Pox is now curable, should it go untreated or should the witch or wizard to catch it is elderly, nothing can be done to stop it from being fatal. As Fleamont (70) and Euphemia (69) had reached their old age even by wizarding standards, the Healers of St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries here in London knew the disease would eventually take them. It was with the knowledge that his parents' days were numbered that James Potter scrambled to marry.

The ceremony and reception both took place in the gardens behind the Potter family estate — lovingly named the Potter's House in honour of the first of their name — just outside of Godric's Hollow, and guests report that the sun remained shining for the duration of the event. Sadly, due to the contagiousness of Dragon Pox, Fleamont and Euphemia's Healers prohibited them from attending. That evening, however, the new Mr and Mrs Potter, accompanied by their best man, Black, skipped out on the remainder of their own reception to visit St Mungo's, where they exchanged their vows for a second time, still in their wedding

attire and standing on the other side of the transparent protective barrier that surrounded Fleamont and Euphemia.

A Healer who chooses to remain anonymous reports that the young Mr and Mrs Potter and their best man did not leave the elder Potters' hospital room until approximately four o'clock yesterday morning, after Fleamont and Euphemia had finally passed on.

It is strange, to say the least, that whilst war tears us apart, it also has the power to draw us together. It is a consequence of death: realising one's own mortality. The number of weddings in the past ten years alone have been double that of the decade before, and it rises still, with every life that is lost. Friends of the young Mr and Mrs Potter, Aurors Frank Longbottom and Alice Fortescue, are yet another example of this; recently engaged, they have already selected this coming August for their wedding to take place.

At this time, we at The Daily Prophet *offer our sincerest condolences to the young Potters, be them a Potter by blood, marriage, or simply in spirit.*

The obituary for Fleamont and Euphemia Potter can be found on page 12.

At the very bottom of the article was a second photograph that Hermione had also failed to notice, until she watched a teardrop land right on top of it, leaving a wet spot on the chest of a beaming Fleamont Potter.

He was pictured in a cheerfully-decorated room flooded with upholstery in various shades of red, his back to a large, colourfully-decorated Christmas tree. On his right, Euphemia was holding up a glass of eggnog in toast, her other hand on Sirius' shoulder as he held up his own beside her, looking rosy-cheeked and more than a little drunk. On Fleamont's left was an equally rosy-cheeked but (only slightly) less drunk-looking Lily, who seemed to be arguing with whoever was behind the camera. A second later, James appeared in the frame, stumbling into Sirius in his haste; Sirius' eggnog wound up all down his front and Euphemia jumped back with a silent shriek, her own drink slopping onto Fleamont, who simply grinned and made a face which seemed to say, "What can you do?" Lily, meanwhile, nearly toppled over laughing. James was apologising profusely, laughing himself, when Sirius dumped what remained of his eggnog on his head, then threw his own back with a bark of laughter that Hermione could practically hear rising off the page.

The scene came to an end and started over again, and she watched until her vision became too clouded.

Later, she requested a pair of scissors and two small frames from Dinky, and she placed both photographs on her bedside table, the article itself tucked into the top-left drawer of her desk.

Snape was in a fouler mood than usual when he arrived for training that Saturday and, although Hermione found herself commiserating with him, it did not stop her from wearing a summer dress with lilies printed all over it. He glared at her all through dinner, and Tavaris kept having to smother a laugh.

Most of Sunday was spent practising the piano in the lady's parlour, trying in vain to learn the notes of *My Favourite Things* in the hope of one day playing it for Theodore. Hermione didn't dare ask Dinky or Tavaris to find the sheet music for her, and therefore, had little to no success. Nevertheless, she tried, humming the tune to herself, and guessing each note to the best of her ability.

That was the same day that the *Evening Prophet* announced the death of Lord Arcturus Black III; his wife, Lady Melania Black, had woken up the morning prior to find him lying dead beside her. Their son, Orion, was named the Head of House Black. This was not a title he would hold for longer than a few months, however, since he, too, would die before the year was up. Tavaris was invited to the funeral, which took place six days later, on the grounds of what was apparently both the largest and oldest Black property: Blackwood Manor.

Perhaps due to her dark mood or a combination of that and her desire to hide from her problems, Hermione holed herself up in the library for the whole of Monday. That it was common practice to entertain oneself with something tragic when sad or to read something infuriating when angry was quite the peculiarity, when thought deeply about, so she did not think deeply about it. Instead, she finished reading the journal of Wilfred Nott and proceeded to delve into that of Torsten Nott's other younger brother, Grindel Nott III.

Rather than focusing on potion-making like Wilfred or the Dark Arts like Torsten, Grindel had studied herbology. It took her aback at first, because she had not known herbology to be a Dark subject, nor capable of being made into one.

Alas, Grindel had been a Nott.

Hermione was a quarter of the way through the journal when she came across it: the spell that proved just how Dark herbology could become.

Incantation: Vita Fictilia — translates to 'earthen life.' Wand movement is an upward spiral followed by a forward jab, sending forest-green light at the victim; transforms them into a common household plant: a non-magical fern; transformation takes roughly five seconds to complete itself. The victim shall require watering and access to sunlight in order to survive in their new state; my research tells me they should live the average lifespan of their human self should these needs be met. Counter-curse: Vasa Humana Vita — translates to 'earthenware human life.' Same wand movement as the initial curse.

Her grip slackened and the leather-bound journal landed, open-faced, on her lap; she gaped, horror-struck, at the page, unable to move a single muscle.

"Be wary of that one there. He's rather bitter about how his life turned out."

It was no wonder that Crookshanks spent so much time near the fern in the conservatory; he knew that it was not a fern at all, not really. It was a person; a man who had been Transfigured and left to live out the rest of his days as nothing more than a houseplant.

Hermione recalled the day she had first encountered Bellatrix since going back in time, feeling like an idiot.

"— not exactly to your tastes, of course, but I thought you might like to see it, nonetheless."

"No, not at all, Lord Nott, but I can admit to it being rather interesting. Tell me, who thought up this curse? Was it you?"

"You think I *would come up with something like this? Please, Bellatrix, you know me better than that."*

Bellatrix had cackled then, setting Hermione further on edge, distracting her from what she and Tavaris had been discussing.

"I've always been a dab hand at herbology but it's not an area on which I tend to focus. I, like you, prefer a little more excitement. But it is quite funny, is it not?"

They had found her eavesdropping because they had been headed for the conservatory. How could she have been so stupid as to have missed the signs? Between Tavaris' comments and Crookshanks' clinginess, she should have realised already.

Questions swarmed her, almost dizzying in their speed. Who was the fern? Why had he been chosen as the victim of Grindel Nott's curse? Was it Tavaris who had cast it? Did this man even know what had become of him?

That last one was answered by Grindel.

The victim should maintain their mental faculties and therefore be aware of their altered state; be forewarned that they will remember anything they hear should they ever be returned to their natural state.

Her blood rushing in her ears, Hermione staggered to her feet and nearly ran down the narrow stairwell, out of the library. She stumbled on the last step, feeling rather lightheaded, and steadied herself against the wall before continuing out into the study.

Tavaris was seated behind his desk, and glanced round at the sound of the bookcases parting. Grindel's journal was slammed down in front of him, dislodging an inkwell and splattering whole stacks of parchment with black ink.

"Who is he?" Hermione nearly yelled, and the next sentence to leave her mouth was one she never expected to utter: "who is the fern and what could he have possibly done to deserve this?"

Tavaris lowered his quill very carefully.

“No one you would know,” he said. “Just another insignificant Muggle the Dark Lord brought to me when he requested to see how the curse was executed.”

“*Insignificant*?”

“Well, I can hardly imagine anyone with a name like *Billy Stubbs* could ever be important.”

Hermione felt as though the air had been knocked out of her. Her horror rose right along with her outrage.

“*Billy Stubbs*?” she whispered, and then she began yelling for real. “HE WAS A HUMAN BEING! MAGICAL OR NOT, NO HUMAN LIFE IS WITHOUT SIGNIFICANCE, YOU *HEARTLESS BASTARD*!”

Tavaris did not appreciate that last bit; all calm fled his face, his spine straightened, his shoulders appeared to broaden, and he rose from his seat, planting one hand on his ink-splattered desk and grasping his wand with the other. The look he gave her was deadly, and when he spoke, it was in a low, furious voice.

“Do not *ever* speak to me like that again …” The corners of his lips turned up in what could have been a smile but looked more like a warning. “Do you understand, darling?”

Hermione did, in fact, understand; the problem was that she did not care.

“How long has he been here?” she demanded, her chest heaving as she fumed. Her hand that remained on the desk had clenched into a fist, crumpling more than a few pages of the journal. “HOW LONG HAS HE BEEN STUCK LIKE THIS, TAVARIS?”

Within seconds, Tavaris had her pinned to the wall with one arm pressed against her chest and the tip of his wand digging into her throat. She seized his forearm with a gasp, digging her nails into his skin through the fabric of his robes.

“So silly of me, but I was under the impression you’d learnt your lesson,” he said, his sharp, cruel face hovering a mere inch or two from her own. His eyes — a shade of blue as dark as the deepest ocean waters, where no light could be found — glinted dangerously. “You have been so well-behaved these past few months. Why are you so eager to throw that away now, when you know what fate awaits you if you continue to disobey?”

An image of the cold, dark cellar appeared at the forefront of Hermione’s mind; she trembled, even as she dug her nails in deeper.

“It’s evil what you’ve done to him, you must know that!”

“Don’t be so dramatic. Filthy fucking Muggle like him, he was *nothing* —”

“*HE WAS A PERSON*!” Hermione screamed.

The sound that slipped past Tavaris’ lips was almost a growl. He pressed his wand harder against her windpipe, making it difficult for her to breathe.

"*If you weren't already pregnant* …" He let the threat linger in the air between them, mingling with his harsh breaths and her short rasps.

Right then, Hermione could have raised her hands to his face and pushed her thumbs into his eyes until she either blinded him or he moved out of reach; she could have kneed him in the gut or between the legs and slipped away while he was still hunched over in pain; she could have tried to pry his wand from his hand, continuing to dig her nails into his arm until his grip went slack on reflex; or, she could have kicked his injured leg, sending him staggering backwards into the desk.

Any of these actions would have set her free. But this freedom was a joke; she would not truly be free — not for a long time, she suspected. There was nowhere for her to run either; incapacitating him did not change the fact that he would come after her, and it would be worse when he did — much, much worse.

So, Hermione did none of those things. Instead, with no shortage of difficulty, she released his forearm and dropped her trembling hands to her stomach, its growth obvious now, at four months.

"If you won't harm me while I'm pregnant," she said, in a shaky whisper, "then why do you still have your wand to my neck?"

For a moment, she expected him to hex her, or perhaps summon Dinky to have her taken to the cellar, but then Tavaris' gaze dropped to her stomach. He clenched his teeth, his nostrils flaring, and dug his wand in a little more, making her wince in pain.

And then, suddenly, he stepped back.

Hermione choked on her next gulp of air. She sagged a few inches down the wall, coughing.

"Get out of my fucking sight."

She didn't have to be told twice; on weak legs, she hastened from the room, leaving the journal behind.

The very second the door had swung shut behind her, there was a loud, shattering *CRASH* as something was hurled at it, subsequently breaking. Another *CRASH* soon followed, and Hermione jumped as though electrocuted, fleeing down the hall as fast as her heeled shoes would allow. She turned into the formal dining room, coughing again as she rounded the long table, and entered the bright conservatory on the other side.

Crookshanks blinked up at her sleepily, but there was no need for him to leave the fern to comfort her this time; she fell to her knees in front of it, palms landing on the floor to catch herself.

"The matron at the orphanage, Mrs Cole, told Dumbledore about this one incident where she'd found a rabbit hanging from the rafters," Harry had once shared with her and Ron, "The boy the rabbit belonged to — he'd had an argument with Riddle the day before. I

reckon she knew it was Riddle who'd done it, even if she couldn't sort out how. The boy — his name was —"

"*I'm sorry*," Hermione said, in a watery rasp, gazing at the fern. "*I'm sorry this happened to you … I'm so, so sorry*."

Billy Stubbs could not reply.

*

Hermione woke the following morning with a small bruise on the centre of her throat, right where the scar from Bellatrix's dagger had once been. Standing before the ensuite mirror, she pressed the tips of her fingers against it, tentative, and winced.

One day, she thought determinedly, *I'm going to return home, and I'm going to visit him in his cell, and I'm going to tell him that his wife was a Mudblood.*

It was a pleasurable fantasy. In many ways, her knowledge of the future was a burden, for she knew the horrible fates that awaited the friends she had made in this time, and there was nothing she could do to prevent them, at the risk of damaging the future.

And yet, on the other hand, the knowledge of the fates that awaited those whom she did not care for — those whom she actively despised — filled her with a malicious sort of satisfaction.

All three Lestranges would be spending fifteen years in Azkaban, and one of them would eventually be killed by none other than Hermione's own mother-in-law. Gaspar Avery would avoid Azkaban the first time around, but she had passed by his and Angus Mulciber's maximum-security cells on her last annual inspection, and neither of them had been doing so well; as a matter of fact, she had sent an Auror into Avery's cell to stop him from banging his head against the bars. Rodolphus and Rabastan, meanwhile, had not seemed all that affected, but they, like Mulciber, had spent over half their lives in prison by that point; she had a sneaking suspicion they had befriended a few of the Dementors, after catching Rabastan having an entirely one-sided conversation with one of them about the weather.

Every time Abraxas mockingly called her, "Lady Nott," she would wonder how long it would take for him to contract Dragon Pox, like Fleamont and Euphemia Potter had. She did not know what fate awaited Edmund, but he had not been alive to take part in the second war.

The satisfaction was even greater when Hermione knew she would have a hand in the execution of some of these fates herself. Did it make her a bad person to smile at the memory of sentencing the daughter of the Dark Lord and Bellatrix Lestrange to the Dementor's Kiss? Perhaps, but the sound of a gavel echoing throughout a large chamber was much more appealing when she recalled sentencing someone other than her own son. The memory replayed itself on a loop as she lounged in the sitting room, resting her hands on her ever-expanding abdomen, her shoes kicked off and her feet propped up on a pillow.

Tavaris was on the opposite sofa with Abraxas and Edmund, rather than the armchair he favoured; that spot was occupied by the Dark Lord. Mulciber and Avery Sr, meanwhile, were

reluctantly sharing the loveseat, for she had taken up the whole of their preferred sofa. Pity for them, but Hermione had been there first, napping of all things, and was entirely unwilling to move; her sore feet took precedence over being surrounded by men who could potentially kill her.

Also, she hadn't had any treacle tart yet that day, so her patience was thin.

Typically, either Tavaris or Dinky would notify her prior to a visit from the Dark Lord, but this time, she had only been informed that there would be a meeting, not that it would be taking place at the Nott Estate. If she had known, she would not have decided to take a nap on the ground floor.

Currently, their evening gathering seemed too casual to be called a meeting. In fact, she might have even called it a reunion of sorts, between old school friends; they were all reminiscing on the days of the Knights of Walpurgis — the first of the Death Eaters — and comparing the talent of the Dark Lord's newest recruits to that of their younger selves.

"Did you ever hear about your son's performance on his first mission, Abraxas?" Mulciber Sr asked, sounding amused. "No, you wouldn't have, would you? You weren't there and I doubt he'd have told you." He laughed gruffly, the shaking of his shoulders nearly causing the drink in his hand to spill. "One look at the mangled body in front of him and he retched all over the stupid Muggle's welcome mat."

Avery Sr sniggered beside him.

"It was ever so thoughtful of them to put that mat out," he said, before putting on a falsely bright smile and making his voice unnervingly cheerful. "'All Are Welcome Here!' It's as if they had known we were coming."

Rubbing his temple, Abraxas muttered heavily, "Lucius has always been unfortunately sensitive."

"Unlike our Lord," said Tavaris, "who hardly batted an eye after ridding us of that whinging Mudblood, Warren."

"I'm sure he shall grow out of it in time," said the Dark Lord. He smirked, idly swirling the amber liquid in his tumbler. "All he needs is a little *push* in the right direction."

"He's twenty-five," Tavaris pointed out, "one would think his bollocks have dropped by now."

"Then perhaps he should be joining the others who come here, Tavaris. The embarrassment of being shown up by those who are barely of age should be encouragement enough for him to move past his … *sensitivity*."

Abraxas frowned into the depths of his drink.

"Gaspar tells me Mione has been listening in on their lessons," Avery said, "and she's apparently gotten over her own *sensitivity*. No doubt a result of being subjected to extended

periods of time spent in *your* presence, Tavaris."

"Oh, no — that's where you're mistaken, Elias," said Tavaris, looking far too pleased for Hermione's liking. "Mione's not once had an issue observing those lessons. As a matter of fact, she regularly secludes herself in the library, reading the journals of my grandfather and his brothers — and that's entirely her own doing. I never even told her where the library was, you know."

"Surely, not," said Edmund, nonplussed. "I've read those journals myself; they make Godelot's writings look like the work of a saint."

"Torsten, Wilfred, and Grindel Nott were all complete and utter psychopaths," said Hermione bluntly.

"Well, then. It appears she *has* read them."

The Dark Lord gave a low chuckle. She craned her neck to look at him.

"What has Billy Stubbs ever done to *you*?"

"Drop it, Mione," warned Tavaris.

"No, no, it's all right," said the Dark Lord calmly. He tilted his head, peering at Hermione curiously. "How long did it take you to discover the fern was no ordinary plant?"

"Longer than it should have," she admitted, "considering how often Tavaris jokes about it."

The Dark Lord hummed slightly, righting his head. "Well, all I can say is Billy Stubbs deserved his fate —"

Hermione scoffed, transferring her gaze to the ceiling.

"*Do not* interrupt the Dark Lord," said Tavaris. "I will not be telling you a second time."

There was a tense silence. Hermione was certain they were all looking at the Dark Lord, likely expecting him to suddenly draw his wand on her for disrespecting him; even Crookshanks was eyeing him closely, as he laid across the back of the sofa she was on (Cantankerus was once again Silenced so his current facial expression was irrelevant).

After a minute, however, the Dark Lord simply said, "The next time Severus is here, Tavaris, you should ask him to look into the side-effects of consuming Sleeping Draughts during pregnancy."

Hermione stiffened.

"A fine idea, my Lord," Tavaris said. "I've been abstaining these past few months because I hadn't wished to take the risk."

"Why bother with a Sleeping Draught at all?" Mulciber asked, with a grunt.

“Geoffrey, if she were actually conscious,” said Edmund, in a tone that implied Mulciber was being stupid, “she would likely concuss herself trying to fight him off. Pregnant, and she could wind up killing his heir.”

“Stunning Spell, then?” suggested Avery.

“Don’t be daft,” said Tavaris dismissively.

“Even a *mildly* powerful Stunning Spell could make an elderly witch’s heart stop,” said Edmund. “What do you suppose it would do to a pregnant one?”

“I would suggest the Imperius Curse — Angus had some success with that method back in his fifth year, you know, caught himself a Mudblood — but we already know she can fight it off.”

“The *Mudblood* has a name,” said Hermione quietly.

“Not one that matters.”

“Was it a friend of yours, Lady Nott? Is that why you’re so defensive?”

“I believe it was, Abraxas,” said the Dark Lord. “I received a list of the people with whom she interacted the most; two of the names on that list belonged to Mudbloods. Tell us, Lady Nott, was it the new Mrs Potter, whom Severus seems so terribly infatuated with?”

Avery let out a bellowing laugh.

“Do tell us it was her!” implored Mulciber.

Hermione lowered her gaze to glare at him.

“It was Mary Macdonald who your son assaulted,” she said coldly, “and it’s despicable you’re proud he assaulted anyone at all.”

Mulciber waved his hand, flippant.

“He required the practice.”

Avery laughed louder still.

“One would think *that* did not require any practice.”

“I meant the Imperius Curse, you fucking wanker.” Mulciber’s lips twisted, his eyes gleaming, and a second later, he, too, had burst out laughing. “But I suppose practising that other thing wouldn’t hurt, now, would it?”

“It would have been most amusing had it been Lily Potter,” the Dark Lord said ruefully. “A true shame.”

Fighting very hard not to clench her jaw, Hermione returned her gaze to the ceiling once more, and forced herself to picture Delphini Riddle struggling against her restraints as a dark, cloaked figure had glided, hungry, into her cell.

It was not open to the public, the administering of the Dementor's Kiss, legendary as its unsightliness was. To this rule, however, there was one exception, which was made for the family members of the witch or wizard who would be receiving the sentence; for this reason, Draco Malfoy had been permitted to bear witness, alongside Harry and herself.

He had been so still and stony-faced that he had resembled a statue: not one of the softly beautiful sorts, but one of a Spartan warrior; warriors who had been excluded from the first Olympics because they were trained to fight to the death. Hermione had never expected to compare Draco to a warrior, but it had not come as a surprise when she had; Delphini had manipulated, tortured, and threatened to kill his son, thoroughly dissolving any of the hesitancy he had once had. She had screamed first at Harry, then at him, making herself perhaps the only person to have ever called Draco a blood traitor. Cornered and raving, she had claimed yet again that her father would return and that he would make them all pay; she had told them they would be pleading for death by the time her father was finished with them. Draco, unperturbed, had said, "Anyone else currently reminded of her mother?"

And Harry had snorted, albeit without humour. Mercifulness had long been a core part of his morality, practically ingrained in his very bones, but he, too, had been robbed of it; Delphini had, by means of the stolen Time-Turner, temporarily killed all three of his children, along with himself and the majority of his and Hermione's family.

Mercy ceased to exist once harm was brought upon one's children.

Hermione recalled meeting the hooded gaze of the Dementor, and the words, passed through her own lips, "Kiss her."

Delphini had not been able to scream much after that.

"What are you smirking about over there?" Abraxas asked, and Hermione turned her head to look at him. She had not realised that she had been smirking. It made her feel quite deranged. Could she reasonably blame that on pregnancy hormones?

Before she could come up with a response, there was tumbling motion from within her stomach, big enough to startle her. Wide-eyed, she stared, pressing her hands more firmly against her stomach and holding her breath; a second later, she felt it again, and let out a delighted gasp of a laugh.

"What?" Tavaris said quickly. "Has something happened?"

Hermione shook her head.

"He's kicking," she breathed. Amazing, that such a thing could still awe her the third time around.

In a heartbeat, Tavaris was clumsily crossing the floor, catching himself on the arm of the sofa. He dropped down on the edge, right by her thighs, and reached out a hand only to have her swat it away; he reacted by giving her own hand a hard smack that had her hissing through her teeth, then planted his palm on the centre of her stomach.

"Not there," she told him snappishly. She grabbed his hand and slid it a little lower, just as there was another tumbling, akin to the sensation of having butterflies, but far more visceral. "You feel that? That's him moving."

A laugh equally delighted to her own escaped Tavaris. It made her want to growl at him. He leaned down, gazing open-mouthed at her stomach.

"My son," he whispered, "that's my son …"

Unfortunately, thought Hermione, but then there was another movement, and she was too excited to stay bitter. It did not matter that there were five Death Eaters present to witness this milestone, nor that one of them was responsible for that which had led to it — it did not even matter that the Dark Lord was no more than a couple of metres away — because that was her son in there.

"Congratulations, Tavaris," she heard the Dark Lord say.

"Thank you, my Lord," Tavaris said, sounding slightly breathless. "Thank you, truly. I am forever indebted to you for this — for giving me the means to create my heir."

"Have you decided the name yet?" asked Avery.

"I'd thought perhaps —"

"Theodore," said Hermione. At last, she looked up. "His name is Theodore."

Tavaris furrowed his brow, considering this.

"A derivation of Theomund," remarked the Dark Lord, in an appreciative voice, "the first Nott to arrive in the British Isles."

"Indeed, my Lord. It's well suited," said Tavaris, shooting him a quick glance full of significance. "He shall be named Theodore Tavaris Nott. Excellent choice, darling."

Her lip curled in disdain.

"Theodore *Tavaris*? Why must he have *your* name?"

"It's traditional," Abraxas pointed out.

"What about Theodore William?"

"Too plain," dismissed Tavaris.

"Fine, then! Theodore William Tavaris?"

“Tavaris William.”

“Theodore Tavaris William Nott. Deal.” Hermione extended her hand and Tavaris shook it, grinning.

And just like that, she had successfully named the grandson of the wizard rumoured to have created the *Pure-Blood Directory* after her Muggle father.

A small smile playing at her lips, she gazed back down at her stomach, feeling Theodore give her another kick, and she wondered how she could have ever believed she would not love him like she did Rose and Hugo. After all, she had feared the very same thing whilst pregnant with the latter, and so had Ron, for only after meeting their firstborn had they realised just how deeply it was possible to love another human being. In the end, of course, they need not have worried, because, second-born child or not, Hugo was still their son.

Even as early as it was, Hermione knew without a shadow of a doubt that there was no one currently alive whom she loved more than Theodore, because, be it by choice or not, he was still her son.

My Theodore.

Chapter End Notes

Another not-devastating end to a chapter! Please note that I specified, "end," because yes, the rest was really quite awful.

I'm really curious to know if anyone saw the fern being a person coming, or if anyone had any other theories about it. Please tell me in the comments!

Also, Euphemia Potter's maiden name is never revealed nor confirmed in cannon, so I just made one up, and Arcturus Black III actually died in 1991 — my mistake, that — but for the purposes of this story, we shall just go with it.

The Ends and Their Means

Chapter Summary

> Were you expecting adventure? Were you hoping for fun?
> My friend, you're indentured
> And pleasure's exempt from your tenure
> So venture back down to your slum
> That's provided at generous prices
> Your worth is determined by your sacrifices
> — The Fine Print, The Stupendium

Chapter Notes

> This chapter contains two alternative POVs, because Hermione was in need of a nap.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"A — *ah* — little redecorating, sir?"

"Something of the sort, it would seem."

"I'd noticed the new carpet on the stairs up to the library but … I'd thought perhaps that was just an attempt to get under Bella's skin."

"Oh, it was."

"The lilies, too, I suppose?"

"Yes. Those, too. She garnered quite the reaction from Severus, although he fought valiantly to hide it."

"And now, sir? Whose anger is it she's hoping to incite now?"

"That is an excellent question, Barty. I have no idea."

Only a few minutes before, Regulus Black and Barty Crouch Jr had arrived to spend the second week of July at the Nott Estate studying under Lord Nott. At their knock, they had been greeted not by the house-elf with whom they had by that point grown familiar, but by a much older one called Goppy, who took their belongings and informed them that they were not, in fact, expected in the study, since, apparently, "Master Tavaris be by the sitting room and not moving for long time."

They now stood on either side of Lord Nott at the threshold of the sitting room, watching Mione Greenwood — although, truthfully, she had been Mione Nott for quite a while now — putter about with the Notts' other house-elf, Dinky, evidently doing some redecorating.

Scattered about the room were various sizes of brown paper packages tied up with strings that had been separated into small piles, most likely for organisational purposes, but, in Regulus' eyes, nothing about this scene looked particularly organised.

The dark grey rug that once laid in the centre of the room had been rolled up and shoved aside; the majority of the books that had filled the tall bookcases on either side of the fireplace were now in a poorly-balanced stack on the floor; a quill, inkwell, and a long scroll of parchment with what appeared to be some sort of list on it were on the coffee table; and the curtains a shade of green so dark they almost looked black that had previously hung above the windows — the material thick enough that one had to peer at the clock on the mantle if they wished to have any idea what time of day it was — were now draped heavily over the armchair while Dinky put up new ones, these significantly lighter, a softer grey, with a silver trim and tie.

Sunlight flooded the formerly dim and gloomy room, and Regulus, reflecting on his own home, was just a tiny bit envious. Beside him, Nott was squinting as though it had suddenly become too bright for him.

"Oh, that looks wonderful, Dinky!" Greenwood said in a pleased voice, gazing up at the new drapery. "It's already much less stuffy in here now, don't you think?"

Dinky nodded seriously.

"Dinky agrees with Mistress Mione. The new heir be needing much, much sun to grow."

Regulus glanced sideways at Nott, who opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again to say, in a slightly dumbfounded voice, "I feel as though she may be … *nesting* …"

Barty gave a soft snicker. Regulus shot him a sharp look behind Nott's back, to which Barty merely shrugged one shoulder, unabashed.

Just then, Greenwood opened one of the packages and withdrew a large, hideously orange poster, emblazoned on the front of which, in big, bold letters, was, *CHUDLEY CANNONS*.

"Mione, darling?" said Nott. "Would you please explain to me what it is you are doing?"

For the first time since Regulus and Barty had arrived, Greenwood tore her attention away from her current pursuit to look over at them.

"Oh," she said, and she offered Regulus a small smile, "hello, Regulus." She then glanced at Barty, dropping her smile, and added coolly, "Barty."

Regulus had not the slightest idea why she was always so kind to him, especially when she made no effort to hide her disdain for everyone else. Perhaps it was because she had been

friends with Sirius, but he doubted it; after all, it was not as though Sirius ever had anything positive to say about him.

“Mione?”

“Right, yes,” said Greenwood. “Dinky and I are just doing some redecorating, you see — livening the place up a bit.”

“And in order to accomplish this,” said Nott slowly, “you required a Chudley Cannons poster?”

Greenwood went a little pink. Regulus wondered if that was because of how poorly the Chudley Cannons had been doing lately; he received second-hand embarrassment just from reading their statistics in *Seeker Weekly*.

“I got it for my bedroom, actually.”

“I hadn’t known you were a Quidditch fan.”

“I’m not. No offence —” Greenwood shot Regulus an apologetic look, “— but I find it rather boring unless you have someone to cheer for, in which case it’s only anxiety-inducing.”

“And yet you ordered a Quidditch poster for yourself,” Barty clarified.

“I did.” Greenwood nodded uncomfortably, then quickly tucked the poster back into its package before opening another. “Oh, there they are. There should really be stamps on these packages to better differentiate them.” With a happy sigh, she loaded her arms up with books and went over to the nearest bookcase, where she carefully set them all down before going back for more.

Nott narrowed his eyes.

“Replacing my books now, are you?”

“Books like the majority of the ones you keep down here oughtn’t be out for just anyone to see,” said Greenwood, very matter-of-factly. “Besides, I don’t want Theodore getting his hands on them, once he’s old enough to try. So, I got new ones, and the old ones we can add to the library. Although,” she added, frowning, “you should probably add an Extension Charm to the shelves, seeing as we’re nearly out of room.”

As if they had been waiting for their cue, Dinky snapped their fingers and gone were the stack of books that had previously occupied the bookcase, presumably relocated to the even more disorganised floor of the library upstairs.

“Oh, and these? You’ll need to lift the Sticking Charm so I can make room for the new books.” Greenwood pointed to a set of granite bookends on the shelf by her head and met Nott’s gaze with an innocent yet somehow menacing smile. “Don’t worry, I promise not to weaponise them again before you get the chance to recast it.”

Regulus glanced covertly at Nott, curious as to what she meant by that. His curiosity only grew when, glowering, Nott turned and limped away, his walking-stick hitting the floor with little *thuds* as he went.

Greenwood actually smirked at the sight, before transferring her gaze to Barty and, amused still, asking, "So, Barty, where exactly does your father think you are right now?"

Predictably, Barty bristled.

"Accompanying me on a visit to the Lestranges' summer home in Champagne," Regulus said smoothly, because whatever came out of Barty's mouth then was sure to be unpleasant. "Excuse us."

He grabbed Barty by the shoulder and, with a nod to Greenwood, steered him in the direction Nott had gone.

"Stupid bitch," Barty muttered mutinously.

Regulus just gave his shoulder a pat and dropped his hand, unwilling to dignify that with a response. Nott had not gotten far, slow as he moved these days, and it did not take long for them to catch up, joining him just as he threw open the door to his study. Regulus and Barty automatically sat down in the two chairs facing the desk and waited for Nott to take his seat, propping his walking-stick up against the bookcase behind him.

He began sorting through the scrolls littering his desk.

"Goppy will have taken your belongings up to the second floor for you," he said. "The guest rooms, as you can probably recall, are just at the top of the stairs, across from the drawing room. You'll have the opportunity to settle in before we get on with today's plans, but first …" He picked up a thick folder, clearly what he had been searching for, and slid it across the desk. "Have either of you seen these before?"

Regulus and Barty leaned forward, and the latter opened the folder so they could peer at its contents; inside was a collection of newspaper clippings, all containing small, hand-drawn cartoons that moved on a loop within their boxes. The topmost one consisted of two figures wearing black robes and bone-white masks and standing before a pen of pigs. As Regulus and Barty watched, hand-written words appeared above the head of one of the figures: *See, they're filthy.* The figure in question was pointing at the pigs rolling about in a pile of mud. The other figure leaned in for a better look with its hand on the fence of the pen, then recoiled, holding up the hand for them both to stare at; there was now a spot of mud on it. The figure that had spoken immediately drew its wand to point it at the other and the words above faded away, only to immediately be replaced with, *You traitor!*

Something twisted inside Regulus' stomach. He quickly looked at another clipping, this one an image of a large, green snake coiled on the seat of a great throne. At the foot of the throne knelt a cloaked figure identical to the last two, its head bowed, and its arms extended, continuously lifting and lowering in worship. He inhaled sharply when he read the words to appear above its head: *All hail the Great Snake, Lord of Bigots and Saviour of the Inbred.*

Barty was fuming. “How *dare* —”

“Indeed,” said Nott.

Regulus ignored them in favour of brushing aside the top two clippings to look at the ones beneath. His attention was swiftly captured by an image of the same snake as before: this time, the snake was curled around a book, propped up by its tail to read; on the cover of the book was the title, *DARK-LORDING FOR DUMMIES*. Beside the snake was an elderly wizard whose wrists and ankles were chained and who — Regulus blinked — bore an uncanny resemblance to Gellert Grindelwald. The cartoon-Grindelwald shook his head in exasperation just as a line of speech appeared on the page, reading, *Yeah, good luck with that, mate.* The next line was no more than a series of “*S*”s as the snake hissed in reply.

“Something ought to be done about this.”

“And something shall.” Nott’s tone made Regulus raise his head, just in time to see his lips turn up in a smirk. “That is what I wished to speak to you about. You see, now that you have come of age, the Dark Lord has deemed it time for you to … prove yourselves, I suppose you could say.”

Barty leaned closer, eager, meanwhile that thing in Regulus’ stomach twisted further, his shoulders tensing.

“The illustrator of these *doodles*,” Nott went on, sneering slightly, “must be taught what it means to disrespect the Dark Lord. The two of you shall join the younger Lestranges — it’ll be Rabastan’s first time taking on a task of this nature as well, since he came of age himself last month. We will spend the week ensuring you are sufficiently prepared, then on Saturday night the five of you will Apparate to our target’s home in London to carry out the Dark Lord’s orders.”

The twisting in Regulus’ stomach ceased, replaced by a tightness so consuming that he momentarily forgot how to breathe. At the same time, however, he felt his chest fill with pride at the knowledge that the Dark Lord had deemed him worthy of such a task. Regulus decided to focus on his pride and ignore all else.

“Who is the target?” he asked.

From beneath the collection of newspaper clippings, Nott withdrew a printed record with a moving photograph of a young, dark-skinned man with a handsome, grinning face pinned to the front.

“Orvyn Shacklebolt, pure-blood wizard born May the seventh, nineteen-fifty-one, son of Bellinus and Annaliese Shacklebolt, older brother of Kingsley Shacklebolt, and resident of Eighty-Two Achilles Way, Knightsbridge.”

“A Shacklebolt?” said Regulus, taken aback. “The Shacklebolts are listed in the *Pure-Blood Directory*; they’re among the Sacred Twenty-Eight.”

“And yet Orvyn has proven that’s a list he does not belong on,” said Nott, “despite his surname.”

“Kingsley Shacklebolt is in the year above us,” said Barty. “He’s one of the prefects for Gryffindor.”

“The Shacklebolts are a predominantly Gryffindor family. This does not change the fact that they are, and will remain so due to our involvement, pure of blood. You see —”

Before Nott could finish his sentence, he was interrupted as the door to the study came swinging open; Greenwood entered, a scroll of parchment in hand. He shot her an irritated look.

“*What*?”

“This is a list of things that need baby-proofing,” Greenwood said, apparently unbothered by the sharpness of her husband’s tone. She strode towards them to set the scroll down on the desk. “I’d do it myself but, seeing as I don’t have access to a wand …” She trailed off pointedly.

Rolling his eyes, Nott brushed her list aside and gave her a wave of dismissal, but rather than leave, Greenwood peered curiously at the clippings and proceeded to let out a small, tinkling laugh. She came nearer, seemingly oblivious to the impatient glares Barty and Nott were shooting her, and dug one clipping out from the untidy pile.

“This one’s my favourite,” she said brightly. For a moment, she watched the scene play out, then let out another laugh, holding it up for the three of them to see. Within the box was a glass encasement, not unlike those in the Trophy Room at Hogwarts, and amongst the shelves of awards was the green snake and the cartoon-Grindelwald, both shrunken down to match the size of the trophies that surrounded them. Standing proudly before the encasement was a tall wizard with a long beard who wore violet, star-patterned robes, a matching wizard’s hat, and half-moon spectacles: Dumbledore. A second wizard stood opposite him, staring at the display, and when he turned to face cartoon-Dumbledore, Regulus immediately recognised him as Barty’s father, the current Head of Magical Law Enforcement. The script appeared a second later: *What are you — a collector?*

Nott suddenly smiled.

“I’m pleased you’ve enjoyed them, darling,” he said, in a voice that was eerily soft, “because there won’t be any more after Saturday.”

Greenwood’s face fell. Continuing at last, Nott looked back at Regulus and Barty and pointed to the record of Orvyn Shacklebolt.

“As it happens, this record contains a few inaccuracies. You see, Orvyn Shacklebolt currently lives in Bromley with his Muggle wife, under the pseudonym *Thomas* —”

There was a small noise from Regulus’ left, almost like a squeak; he glanced at Greenwood again to find her frozen, her face unnaturally pale.

“Forgive me, sir,” said Barty, his tone forcibly polite, “but I must’ve misheard you … he’s taken a *Muggle* wife?”

“You heard me perfectly fine, Barty. And to make matters worse, that Muggle is seven months pregnant with his *son*.”

Greenwood’s lips parted slowly, her eyes widening, as if some unknown horror was now dawning on her.

“The rest of the Shacklebolts are unaware of this development. As I understand it, they believe he’s simply found himself a flat in the Muggle world, in which to hide so he might avoid the consequences of what he’s been illustrating. Orvyn has wisely kept his marriage a secret, but, unfortunately for him, not secret enough.

“You’ll be killing two birds with one stone; Orvyn will receive his warning to stop publishing his little doodles, and House Shacklebolt will be saved from having their bloodline sullied by the half-blood son of some filthy, disease-ridden Muggle.”

Regulus returned his gaze to Nott, struggling not to gape in disbelief. “The wife?” he said. “We’ve been tasked to kill his pregnant wife?”

Greenwood’s breathing came in short and shaky pants.

“We should tell the Shacklebolts it was us who put a stop to this threat,” said Barty. “Let them know they owe the Dark Lord their gratitude. Perhaps then they will show their support for his righteous cause.”

“Perhaps,” Nott chuckled. “For them to believe that she was ever pregnant, though, someone will have to ensure Bellatrix leaves the body at least *somewhat* recognisable —”

A staggered step followed by a *thump* had Regulus, Barty, and Nott all turning their heads in time to see Greenwood slide limply down the wall to the floor in a dead faint.

Nott cursed under his breath, then rose to his feet, leaning on his desk for support, and shouted, “Dinky!”

With a *pop*, Dinky appeared beside him. They took one look at Greenwood’s unmoving form and yelped.

“No!” Dinky cried in fear, scurrying over to her, and for a second, Regulus naïvely believed they were worried for her, but then they added, “no, Master Tavaris’ heir!”

For the first time since his arrival, Regulus allowed his eyes to drift from Greenwood’s face, trailing down to her swollen abdomen. There had barely been the slightest of bumps to be seen the last time he had been at the Nott Estate, in April, but now there was no denying she was pregnant, or that it was Nott who had gotten her that way. Regulus realised, suddenly, as Nott yelled at Dinky for letting Greenwood overexert herself, that the mysterious twisting in his stomach was, in reality, guilt.

“Take her to her room! Now! Quickly! I’ll summon Healer Gibbon. There had better be no damage to my heir, Dinky, or you’ll find yourself nailed to the cellar door by your fucking ears!”

If it had not been for Regulus and the others — for the information collected and passed on to the Dark Lord by him, Barty, Rabastan, Evan, Mulciber, Avery, and Snape — Greenwood would not be in the position she was now; she would not be imprisoned in the Nott Estate and forced to carry the child of a member of the Inner Circle. Older than himself, she may have been, Regulus still knew that nineteen was far too young for this.

Dear Bella, he had written thoughtlessly — carelessly — in a letter to his cousin nearly two years ago, *I had a thought the other day, whilst reading out by the Forbidden Forest.*

It was their code for Greenwood: the mention of their proximity to a dense forest.

Polyjuice Potion is known for its difficulty, is it not? Even the seventh-years, who I heard are studying it now, struggle with the brewing process. Imagine the talent someone would have to possess in order to brew it successfully at thirteen, purely out of curiosity, for I am sure they would have no real need of it at that age. I imagine they would not have even heard of it at that point, but simply found it whilst reading Moste Potente Potions. An odd thing for a thirteen-year-old to read, would you not say? Just a thought.

Dinky Disapparated with a small, boney hand gripping Greenwood’s wrist. Nott started rifling through his desk for a spare piece of parchment and a quill, cursing and muttering about how his wife needed to be healed of her own “thoughtlessness.”

“You two go on upstairs,” he told Regulus and Barty, as he hastily scribbled out a letter. “Take the file on Orvyn Shacklebolt with you to look over. You will have the information memorised before Saturday.”

“Yes, sir,” said Barty. He gathered the scattered records and clippings to return them to their folder and, tucking it under his arm, led the way out of the study. As they started up the wide staircase at the end of the large front hall, he shot Regulus an excited grin. “A task, Reggie, we’ve been assigned our first real task, can you believe it?”

“We’ve been asked to murder a pregnant woman in cold blood,” said Regulus, in a mindfully low voice. He focused on taking the stairs one step at a time, on keeping his face blank. “I understand that Shacklebolt needs to be taught a lesson, but to kill his wife … his unborn son … doesn’t that seem … unnecessarily cruel?”

He could feel Barty’s gaze hot on the side of his face.

“It is noble work the Dark Lord is doing,” Regulus went on, “and I am more honoured to be a part of it than I could possibly put into words, you know that. Muggles need to be put back in their place; the wizarding world at large must be reminded of the threat they pose to our very *existence* …”

Movement could be heard from behind the first door they passed when they reached the first floor: the door to Greenwood’s bedroom.

“But a *pregnant woman*, Barty … that —” He stopped himself.

Barty cast a quick, sweeping glance at their surroundings before coming to a halt and drawing Regulus closer with a hand on the back of his neck. He pressed their foreheads together, his expression soft, yet unyielding.

“Don’t think about it like that, Reggie,” he whispered. “You’ve no reason to feel any guilt over this, not when Muggles hardly qualify as human to begin with. Just remember you’re doing the Dark Lord’s work — remember that honour, that privilege — and forget about all the rest. The wizarding world is in need of help and that’s precisely what we’re providing, regardless of whether or not they choose to see it that way.”

Regulus shut his eyes.

“And Greenwood?” he whispered back. “What about her situation helps the wizarding world?”

“She’s providing a family nearly as sacred as your own with an heir. That itself is a noble task. Besides, you know she was offered a position in his ranks — she turned it down. She’s made her bed; now she must lie in it.”

Regulus grimaced, his insides now seeming to rearrange themselves in the wake of his guilt.

“The methods are not important,” Barty told him firmly. He drew back slightly to press his lips to Regulus’ temple, the warmth of his breath fanning across Regulus’ face. “Don’t let your guilt control you, Reggie. Remember: the ends will *always* justify the means.”

Although this was a belief Regulus had once held himself, he was beginning to doubt its validity.

What ends could possibly justify this?

*

Severus Snape found it vaguely fascinating to watch as the Nott Estate steadily transformed from the haunting manor of Bram Stoker’s dreams to a warm, welcoming home each time he arrived for a lesson with Tavaris Nott. He could admit to being suitably impressed by Mione Greenwood’s perseverance, if only to himself. Her valiant attempts to make the best out of her less than appealing circumstance were worthy of at least a modicum of respect. He had known of her strength in both mind and magic, but he had not known she possessed such an iron will until he bore witness to the unapologetic way with which she made her presence impossible to ignore.

That said, Severus could do without the surplus of lilies.

When he arrived on the third Sunday of July, he was surprised to be greeted at the door by the Notts’ house-elf, Dinky, despite that having been the case since he had first begun visiting, in the summer before his seventh year; in recent months, it had been Greenwood who had met him at the door. It had caught him off guard the first time she had done it, and had therefore

made him suspicious, but no more than a few seconds had passed before he had cottoned on to her motives. All it had taken was a glimpse at her knowing smile and the newly-added vase of lilies to understand that she was unwilling to let him forget his betrayal. She had, it appeared, made it her own personal mission to provide him with as many reminders of Lily as she feasibly could.

Since then, every room he dared to enter held at least one vase of lilies, often paired with what took him longer than he would have preferred to recognise as petunias, as though Greenwood worried that she had not made her meaning clear enough. Sometimes she would even greet him in a dress or a set of robes that were patterned with lilies, just to twist the knife.

But on that day, Severus did not see Greenwood once. He did not see her when he arrived, nor did he see her whilst he had his lessons, during which she usually popped in with her ginger cat to observe Nott's instruction (one of her more irritating habits). He did not even see her in passing, and it made him wary. What did nothing to help this newfound wariness was the added presence of Regulus Black and Barty Crouch Jr, and, over the course of the afternoon, it grew to the point of distraction.

Out on the grounds, he joined Nott in preparing them both for a mission they were set to go on that night — an attack on the Muggle wife of the wizard who had been foolishly publishing those ridiculous illustrations of the Dark Lord and his followers — and Greenwood, for some reason, did not once show up to watch over the younger brother of her dear friend, that thick-headed, self-obsessed blood traitor Sirius Black. According to what Severus had heard, she almost always remained nearby when Regulus Black was there — a soft spot, one might call it, due to her friendship with his brother.

Not that their friendship means much these days, Severus thought as he lowered his wand, allowing the younger Black a moment to hydrate himself with a Water-Conjuring Charm. Whispers were loudest when one was silent, and Severus was entirely too practised in remaining silent; while restocking his supply of potions' ingredients at Slug and Jiggers Apothecary the month before, he had heard the grating voice of Sirius Black and had stopped in his tracks to listen in on his conversation. It was not until he had spotted the perpetually electrocuted-looking hair of James Potter from between the shelves that he had discovered to whom Black was speaking.

"— caught him reading her letter again last night," Black had been saying, his voice louder than he had likely been aware. "A year of silence, Prongs, and he's still taking it out every time someone mentions the surname Nott."

"He's grieving, Padfoot," Potter had replied, picking up a bottle of Sleekeazy's Hair Potion. "D'you reckon they'd give this to me for free if I told them my dad invented it?"

"It's depressing," Black had persisted. "I mean, she actually *married* the bastard. All those months of her and Moony spending practically every waking minute together and the second he's gone she's run off with someone else — someone even Dumbledore reckons is a Death Eater — and the only explanation he gets is a fucking letter?"

“I reckon they would if I told them I’m an owner of the company.” Potter had exhaled heavily then, still looking at the bottle in his hand. “Fuck. I’m an owner of the company.”

“*Prongs*.”

“What, Padfoot? What do you want me to say? It’s not Mione’s fault she got kidnapped — and you know that’s what happened, no matter what Moody says. She probably married Nott at wandpoint.”

“But don’t you think it’s a bit suspicious? She told us that she was offered a spot in You-Know-Who’s ranks — what if she took it?”

“You and I received offers, too, don’t forget. So did Lily, and she’s Muggle-born. It doesn’t mean anything. Now c’mon,” Potter had added, turning away, “let me get this and we can leave.”

“What d’you need that stuff for, anyway? You’ve never used it before.”

“Alice has informed me she doesn’t want my — and I quote — ‘*bird’s nest*’ ruining her wedding photos.”

The last thing Severus had heard before they had moved out of earshot was Black’s migraine-inducing bark of a laugh. He gave himself a small mental shake, returning to the present, and raised an eyebrow at the younger Black in askance. Upon receiving a nod in return, Severus raised his wand.

Despite the growing suspicions of Sirius Black and the knowledge that Greenwood was most likely unaware of them, Severus still would have expected her to continue keeping close to his younger brother, as if thinking she could somehow protect him — from what, Severus did not know. Alas, she was nowhere to be seen.

“You’re not firing quickly enough!” he told Regulus, as the latter ducked to avoid a Leg-Locker Curse. “You dodge well — no doubt a skill you picked up playing Seeker — but that is all you’ll be doing if you cannot manage to hit your opponent back!”

Regulus narrowed his eyes, indignant, and fired a Conjunctivitis Curse at him; Severus deflected it with a Shield Charm and watched, unimpressed, as Regulus was forced to duck again when the curse came streaking back towards him.

“You are meant to be on offence, not defence!” Severus sneered. “Or do you not understand the meaning of the word *attack*?”

Regulus glared at him, and the next second, Severus received a heavy blow to the side and went soaring through the air to land roughly on the grass approximately three yards away. Grinding his teeth to stop himself from groaning in pain, he propped himself up on his elbow, and immediately collapsed due to the sharp, shooting pain in his shoulder.

“My sincerest apologies, Snape!” Crouch Jr called out blithely, without stopping his duel with Nott. “My aim was a little off with that last one!”

Regulus snickered, and Severus wondered if he was destined to forever loathe anyone with the surname Black.

It was hours later, with a Wiggenweld Potion working to heal the sprain to his shoulder, that Severus finally asked after Greenwood. He, Nott, Regulus, and Crouch Jr were sat at the table in the informal dining room, having dinner before the latter two were set to leave, and she was still absent.

“Is your wife not joining us tonight, sir?” he asked Nott in his most indifferent tone of voice, which he would forever deny practising in front of a mirror. He took a bite of his steak, savouring it, to add to the effect.

“No, I’m afraid she’s on bed rest at the moment,” Nott said, looking mildly disgruntled, and Severus’ act of indifference nearly slipped. “She’s not been taking it easy, headstrong as she is. The Healer put her on bed rest for a week. Only a day left now but I’d prefer it if she stayed resting a while longer.”

“I do hope there are no complications with her pregnancy,” said Severus, slicing off another bite of steak. “It would be devastating if something were to happen to your heir because his mother wasn’t mindful enough of her own well-being.”

“Theodore is fine, thank Merlin. Perfectly healthy, our Healer assures me.”

Severus nodded, chewing calmly — or, rather, ensuring it looked that way. His gaze landed on the centrepiece made up, he had recently learnt, of royal lilies and sanguna petunias and gave up his worries in favour of what he considered a reasonable amount of vindictive pleasure.

Regulus was pushing his food about on his plate, eating scarcely a bite. Beside him, Crouch Jr showed no sign of nervousness, happily carving up his steak as though for practice of what was to come.

“Oh, I meant to tell you earlier, Severus,” said Nott abruptly, after swallowing a long sip of elf-made wine. “Two Saturdays from now, you’ll be staying the entire weekend as opposed to a single afternoon. Two others will be joining us to discuss spell creation. Antonin Dolohov, he’s rather accomplished in the field, and Igor Karkaroff, who teaches the Dark Arts class at Durmstrang.”

“I’m honoured,” said Severus truthfully. “Thank you for the opportunity, sir. I will be looking forward to it.”

Nott took another sip of wine, glancing down the table at Regulus, then lowered his goblet, smirking, to say, “You’re a Black, Regulus, not a Malfoy; you can eat without worrying it’ll come back up.”

Crouch Jr snorted, meanwhile Regulus’ lips stretched into a smile that appeared only slightly forced.

“I simply don’t have much of an appetite at the moment,” the latter said. “As you said, sir, I’m a Black; it’s not in my blood to have a weak stomach.” Even Severus struggled to identify the genuineness of his chuckle as he added, “Just look at Bellatrix.”

To no great shock, Nott laughed. He was rather odd this way, in Severus’ opinion; half the time, he would remain silently watchful, an intimidating presence that loomed over Severus’ shoulder as he worked, noticing every last twitch and grimace, and the other half, he would be almost disturbingly gleeful and unnervingly laidback, like whenever Greenwood openly disrespected his students and all he did was laugh at her cleverness.

One never knew which side of Nott they would get, and therein laid the danger. Nevertheless, there was no denying that he was brilliant. *Reminiscent of a mad scientist,* Severus had thought after meeting him for the first time.

“Yes, your cousin certainly has her fair share of fun, doesn’t she? It’s Rodolphus who’s meant to be taking point tonight, but we all know it will really be Bellatrix. It’s the Dark Lord and the Dark Lord alone whom she takes her orders from, although I suppose that’s how it ought to be.”

“Truer words have never been spoken, sir,” said Regulus.

“Bit of rotten luck for Rodolphus, though, I imagine,” added Nott, laughing again.

“What — having a wife with a mind of her own?” said a cool but hoarse voice. All four of them looked to the entrance of the room, where Greenwood stood with her arms crossed over her chest, wearing a periwinkle dressing gown and looking infinitely unamused. “How terribly inconvenient that must be.”

That other, less agreeable side of Nott decided to rear its head; he glowered at her from his seat at the head of the table, his eyes so cold that his gaze alone would have made a weaker being freeze on the spot.

“You’re supposed to be in bed, darling.”

It was incredible how one person could make the word *darling* sound like a threat.

“I wanted to see Regulus and Barty off,” Greenwood said, moving past the threshold to ease herself into the chair on Severus’ left, directly opposite Regulus. “And to still be awake when they returned, for that matter. It’s quite a milestone, their first big task. I’m eager to hear all about it once they’re back.”

“Oh, really?” said Crouch Jr disbelievingly, raising a cocky eyebrow. “You couldn’t seem to handle hearing about it before, and that was just Lord Nott going over the logistics. What makes you think you’ll be able to handle a first-hand account of its outcome?”

Greenwood waved her hand dismissively.

“My fainting —” Severus’ felt his eyebrows shoot up, “— had nothing to do with that. And in any case, I’m perfectly well-rested now.”

“The sight of that Muggle’s blood still fresh on our robes won’t put you on bed rest for another week, then?”

“Did Dinky let you out of your room?” Nott asked before Greenwood could reply.

“Dinky left me to double-check that Regulus’ and Barty’s costumes were all in order for tonight,” she said. “You know, give their masks one last polish for good luck and whatnot.”

“*Costumes*?” repeated Crouch Jr, sneering.

“Should I be calling them something else?”

He glared at her, quietly seething.

“*Mione* —”

“I’ll sit with you, resting, until they return, Tavaris. Then I’ll go back to bed.”

Nott and Greenwood engaged in some sort of battle of wills then, neither one breaking eye-contact with the other for a very long moment, during which no one spoke or made any move to continue eating. Not that they had much left to eat, anyway, seeing as the only plate still holding an even remotely substantial amount of food belonged to Regulus.

At last, Nott scowled and said, “You will remain on the sofa the entire time —”

Greenwood smiled triumphantly —

“— and if you don’t, I shall have Dinky bring me a Sleeping Draught to pour down your throat.”

Her smile dropped.

“The Healer *did* say there was no problem with you continuing to take it.”

“I won’t leave the sofa,” Greenwood promised.

Nott eyed her for a moment longer, as though judging the truthfulness of her claim, then moved his gaze elsewhere.

“You are welcome to wait with us, Severus,” he said. “I can provide you with some reading material I think you’ll find interesting; I believe I’ve yet to show you my great-uncle Wilfred’s journal.”

For some reason, that made Greenwood go pale in the face and shoot Regulus a devastated look.

“Thank you, sir,” said Severus. “I would enjoy that.”

After all, he was curious as to how the brother of one of his least favourite people would perform in his first task. He supposed he and Greenwood shared in their motives for once,

albeit for different reasons.

“Well, then,” said Nott, pushing back his chair, “let us move to the sitting room. Regulus, Barty, if you’re finished eating, go upstairs to dress. Mione, with me.”

Severus spent the next half hour completely immersed in a potioneer’s journal that made *Moste Potente Potions* look like a heart-warming children’s story in which every character lived happily ever after — with a puppy. It took the unnecessarily loud entrance of three excitable Lestranges to draw him from its pages.

“Are they ready yet?” Bellatrix asked by way of greeting. “Is Reggie excited? Rabastan certainly is, is that not right, Rabby?” She ruffled Rabastan’s hair, grinning when he pulled a face. “One never forgets their first task. It is an honour like no other; a true sign of the faith our Lord has so generously bestowed upon us.”

Greenwood looked as if she were practising some sort of breathing technique taught to those who were prone to panic attacks. She very determinedly turned a page of her book — *Ancient Wizarding Traditions: Ladyship Edition* — and continued lounging on the sofa nearest the fireplace as though the arrivals were beyond her notice. That she faced the entryway, however, made it obvious that her guard had not been entirely lowered.

Severus should know; he, too, was facing the entryway.

“Father’s been drilling him all week,” Rodolphus said, idly turning over the bone-white mask in his hands. “And he managed to scarf down a full meal with no trouble. There will be no Lucius Malfoys tonight,” he added, chuckling.

“Oh, that was dreadfully humiliating,” said Bellatrix, with a frown that was half-pout. “Poor Cissy, married to someone with such a weak stomach.”

“Abraxas is convinced he will grow out of it,” said Nott, sitting comfortably on his armchair with the Evening Edition of the *Prophet* on his lap, “but that remains to be seen. At the suggestion of the Dark Lord, Lucius shall be visiting me here for further instruction in due time, so that should help whip him into shape some.”

“One can only hope,” said Rodolphus.

“Hope? There is no such need for hope,” said Bellatrix. “Lord Nott is an excellent teacher. Even the Dark Lord thinks so.”

“That is kind of you to say, Bellatrix.”

Just then, Regulus and Crouch Jr entered the sitting room, and Bellatrix shrieked, rushing over to inspect the former’s robes. She unfastened and refastened the silver clasp at his neck as he tried to squirm away.

“My baby cousin, all grown up and off to torture his first Muggle.”

“Bella —”

“You look so precious in your robes, Reggie, positively adorable, I could just eat you up —”

“Please stop.”

Rabastan sniggered.

“How’s the fit of your mask? It’s not in need of adjustment, is it?”

“Bella, please.”

“Come now, Regulus,” Rodolphus said, looking on in amusement, “she’s just proud of you.”

“She could be proud and not treat me like an infant,” Regulus said reasonably, and promptly had his cheeks pinched. He grimaced and ducked out of Bellatrix’s grasp, hastily positioning himself behind Crouch Jr.

Very unlike his brother, Severus thought, for Sirius Black probably would have responded to her coddling by hexing her, rather than turning it into a game of Hide and Seek.

Nott set aside the *Prophet* and took hold of his walking-stick to heave himself to his feet. Swiftly, the Lestranges formed a horizontal line, their backs straight and their faces set, with Regulus and Crouch Jr following suit a second later. Nott walked slowly down the line, looking each of them over in turn.

“What is your task?”

“To deliver the Dark Lord’s message to Orvyn Shacklebolt, sir,” said Rodolphus.

“What message?”

“That he should think twice the next time he considers disrespecting our Lord, sir,” said Rabastan.

“How will that message be delivered?”

“By ridding him of his *filthy Muggle wife*,” sneered Bellatrix.

Nott paused, giving her a pointed look.

“What state is Shacklebolt to be left in?”

“Alive,” she muttered, sulking.

“Remember that,” said Nott warningly, before moving on. “What address are you Apparating to?”

“Thirty-Four Heathfield Road, sir,” said Regulus. None of his previous nervousness could be heard in his voice, nor could it be seen in his expression, but Severus thought he looked much paler than he had at dinner.

“Where is that?”

“Bromley, London, sir.”

Crouch Jr, on the other hand, was having difficulty keeping a straight face; he kept twisting his lips in what looked like an attempt to stop himself from revealing his enthusiasm.

“Whose orders will you be taking while completing this task?”

“Rodolphus’s, sir.” He gave up, allowing himself to smirk. “But inevitably Bellatrix’s.”

There was a haughty *hmph* sound from Bellatrix that Severus took to mean, “As you should.”

“Good,” said Nott, with a short nod of his head. He moved back to stand directly in front of them all, both hands clasped over the handle of his walking-stick. “Now, when you arrive at the location, you will immediately cast an Anti-Apparation Ward. Do your best to remain unseen, but should you fail, know that any Muggle who tries to intervene is to be either Stunned and Obliviated or killed on sight, I’ll leave the choice up to you. When you have fulfilled this task, you are to return here at once. The Dark Lord will be waiting to receive your report.”

He gave the group one last piercing look.

“Do you understand all that I have said?”

His words were met with a chorus of “Yes, sir”s.

“Off you go, then. And remember, this is the Dark Lord’s work you’re doing. There is no cause more noble than the one you have pledged yourselves to.”

With an excited giggle, Bellatrix looped her arm around that of Regulus and dragged him from the sitting room, Barty close behind.

Nott gripped Rabastan’s shoulder. “Make your father proud,” he told him. “And most importantly, boys,” he added to both him and Rodolphus, suddenly grinning, “have yourselves some fucking fun.”

Sniggering, the two brothers took turns shoving each other out into the hall. At the distant sound of the front doors opening and closing, Nott turned and limped back to his armchair.

“You failed to mention that the Dark Lord would be joining us this evening,” Greenwood said, decidedly unhappy.

“Did I?” said Nott innocently.

“You’ve made a habit of doing that.”

“Do you wish for me to apologise?”

Greenwood rolled her eyes, going back to her book. In the twenty minutes it took for the Dark Lord to arrive, she did not turn a single page.

Both Severus and Nott rose to their feet and bowed, the latter doing so for only a moment before straightening again. Severus, on the other hand, kept his head lowered, unsure if he was permitted to meet the Dark Lord's eerily scarlet gaze.

"It's always a privilege to have you here, my Lord," Nott said. "Please, sit. I'll have Dinky serve you a drink."

"That would be much appreciated, Tavaris," said the Dark Lord, in a voice so smooth that Severus decided he ought to practise it in the mirror as well. "Do rise, Severus."

"My Lord," said Severus gratefully. He straightened but did not retake his seat, nor did he remove his eyes from the floor. "I feel obliged to say that it is an honour to be in your presence once more."

And it was. The pure, unadulterated power that radiated off the Dark Lord in thick, rapturous waves caused Severus' blood to rush, adrenaline pumping through his veins. The Dark Lord's very presence was all-consuming, his power growing increasingly undeniable the closer Severus got. It was this more than anything else that had drawn him to the cause; the chance to absorb some of that power himself, to become strong enough that no one would dare raise wand nor hand against him ever again.

The Dark Lord did not award him a reply, for Severus' words were ones he already knew. Once he had replaced Nott on the armchair and Dinky had been summoned to pour him a drink, Severus deemed it safe to sit down. Nott propped his walking-stick up against the side of the sofa opposite, then lowered himself to sit by Greenwood's feet, bare, for her slippers laid beside her on the floor.

"How is your leg these days, Tavaris?" the Dark Lord asked, as he twirled his tumbler.

"Fine, my Lord," said Nott, taking the drink of his own brought to him by Dinky, who then gave one to Severus. "I received some rather disappointing news, however."

"Do tell."

"The spell that did the damage was of Severus' own invention. *Sectumsempra*, a curse designed — correct me if I'm wrong, Severus — to mirror the slice of a sword."

"That is correct," said Severus, feeling his wariness gradually return to him.

"There is a counter-curse," Nott continued, "but one that works only if cast immediately after the fact. If it is not, like in the case of myself, nothing can be done to heal the injury inflicted."

"I do not envy your luck," said the Dark Lord. He turned his gaze on Severus, appearing — if Severus was not mistaken — rather impressed. "Wise of you, though, I must say, to ensure that any victim of your curse may only be healed at your own mercy."

Severus was deeply relieved to learn that, despite the apparent involvement of his curse, he was not being blamed for Nott's maiming.

“Thank you, my Lord. That means a great deal coming from you.”

The Dark Lord hummed a little, looking away again. This time, his gaze landed on Greenwood, who had yet to put down her book.

“I wonder … If it is truly a curse of Severus’ own invention, how did *you* come to know it, Lady Nott?”

Not once had Severus ever heard the Dark Lord address a single lord or lady by their title — useless as those titles were nowadays outside of the Wizengamot, with the International Statute of Secrecy keeping them from lording over the Muggle villages they lived by — and there was no question that he was only doing so now to mock her.

But Greenwood appeared to be accustomed to this, for all she did was look up, saying nothing.

With a jolt, Severus realised that she was the one responsible for maiming Nott, and he had to stop himself from letting his jaw drop. But then, where could she have heard of his curse? Surely not from her knuckle-headed, pig-brained Gryffindor —

“*Ah*,” he said aloud, drawing the attention of all three of them. “I believe I know how she might’ve learnt it, my Lord. Not long after I created the curse, I used it on a friend of hers. He must’ve told her about it.”

“I see. A member of Gryffindor House, I presume?”

Severus could not help but sneer.

“James Potter, my Lord.”

The Dark Lord seemed to find his disdain amusing. He looked back at Greenwood.

“Is this true, Lady Nott? Did you learn Severus’ curse from the blood traitor James Potter?”

Greenwood gave a stiff nod.

“I suspected something along those lines,” said Nott. He took a sip from his tumbler and glanced over his shoulder at the clock on the mantle. “They’ve been gone half an hour now. I suspect Bellatrix is simply prolonging the task.”

The Dark Lord chuckled.

“Most assuredly.”

“I’m curious to find out how your newer recruits take to the task. In the case of Rabastan, I’ve no concerns, and little Barty Jr has a wild streak that would give his father a stroke if he knew about it, but Regulus …”

The spine of *Ancient Wizarding Traditions: Ladyship Edition* cracked audibly from the tightness with which Greenwood was holding it.

“Do you suspect he takes after his other cousin?” the Dark Lord asked thoughtfully. “That he is more similar to young Narcissa than he is to Bellatrix?”

Tentatively, Nott inclined his head.

“Yes, I believe so,” he said. “In his duels this week, he’s shown a tendency to lean towards the defensive. I doubt combat is the right spot for him. Politics, though, he excels at. It is, of course, your place to decide, my Lord, but I recommend allowing him to remain there.”

The Dark Lord raised his drink to his lips, his eyes narrowed, and Severus marvelled at his own luck, to allow him to witness such a great wizard think.

A moment later, the Dark Lord said, “Well, young Regulus is, after all, most useful in his position as the sole heir to House Black. I see no reason to distract him from that, especially if his duelling skills are as lacking as you say. Besides, it won’t be long before he takes his place as Head of House,” he added, in a subtly suggestive tone; “poor Orion Black, I hear, suffers from a weakened heart …”

The room grew very quiet, the only sound that of the rocks of ice knocking into each other within the Dark Lord’s tumbler as he twirled it once more.

“There’s a curse in one of my great-grandfather’s journals,” Nott ventured cautiously after a minute, his voice hardly above a whisper, “which causes plaque to build up in the walls of the arteries that supply blood to the heart … the arteries are forced to narrow, not over time as they would naturally, but within the span of a few minutes … Eventually, the path of the blood to the heart is entirely blocked, therefore triggering a heart attack …”

“Heart attacks are survivable,” said the Dark Lord. His voice was not the least bit cautious, but it was quiet all the same.

Severus wondered if the potential murdering of the lord of a pure-blood house was always discussed in such hushed tones. Then he wondered if he could manage to release his breath without revealing that he had been holding it.

“With treatment, yes, Healers can, of course, remove the blockage … but this particular curse makes that blockage immovable … the arteries impossible to clear by any spell or potion, only manually …”

“Surgery,” breathed Greenwood, staring at Nott with wide, horrified eyes. She had finally closed her book and abandoned her lounging in favour of sitting upright, her feet back in her slippers and planted on the floor. “The blockage can only be removed by open-heart surgery — a Muggle method that no Healer would ever think to use.”

Nott nodded carefully.

“I would like to take this journal with me when I leave here, Tavaris.”

“Of course, my Lord.”

A long moment passed, during which Severus tried to guess how long it would take for the announcement of Orion Black's death to appear in the *Prophet*, and then the sound of the front doors alerted them to the return of Regulus, Crouch Jr, and the three Lestranges. This time, Bellatrix could be heard cursing furiously long before they all reached the sitting room.

Greenwood appeared to brace herself.

"He *knew*!" Bellatrix screeched the second she crossed the threshold. She had her mask clutched in one hand and her wand in the other. Her hood was drawn back, her hair tumbling wildly over her shoulders, and the sleeves of her robes were stained with blood. "He *knew* we were coming!"

"There were wards surrounding the entire property," snarled Rodolphus, looking no less livid than his wife. "They were *impenetrable* — not a single weak spot to be found!"

As though they had not yet noticed him, the moment the Dark Lord stood, the whole group dropped to their knees, Regulus lagging by no more than a millisecond.

"Am I right in assuming," he began silkily, slow, even strides bringing him steadily closer, "what you are trying to say is that you … *failed*?"

"No!" cried Bellatrix at once, lifting her head. Desperation covered every inch of her face. "My Lord, I would never —!"

"Then the wife of Orvyn Shacklebolt is indeed dead?"

"No, my Lord —"

Greenwood looked like she might cry in relief —

"— forgive me, the wards —"

"It was not intended to be such a complicated task," said the Dark Lord, cutting Bellatrix off. He stopped before the line of bowed heads, his hands tucked into his pockets in a manner that no one with half a brain would mistake for casual. "One would think you would have no trouble seeing it through, Bellatrix … nor you, Rodolphus, regardless of the accompaniment of three new recruits … So simple, your task was … so straightforward … yet you were unsuccessful …"

"Please, my Lord," Rodolphus implored, "it was the wards, if it were not for them, we wouldn't have had any trouble."

"Did you at least attempt to penetrate them?"

"Yes, my Lord! We spent every minute from the point of our arrival to that of our departure attempting to break through, but they were too strong, my Lord, we could not do it!"

"We interrogated a neighbour, my Lord — the wife's been put on bed rest, they have not left the house at all! But we left our warning, my Lord, we did — the Muggle we interrogated has been left pinned to his own front door, dead at my own hand!"

“Clever as that might have been, Bellatrix, I confess myself disappointed.”

Bellatrix and Rodolphus both flinched, the former hanging her head again. The shoulders of Rabastan, Crouch Jr, and Regulus were all fraught with tension.

“What a pitiful example you have set for our new recruits. What must they think of our cause now, because of you?” The Dark Lord paused to survey the group, and not even Bellatrix dared move. “Now, in your failure, you have left them to be punished for your own mistakes.”

Regulus and Crouch Jr shared a glance, their eyes wide and their brows furrowed, too new and too unconnected to know why all three Lestranges had now begun to tremble. Although he had never done anything to warrant punishment himself, Severus had seen it carried out before; he knew precisely what fate awaited them, and was, once again, holding his breath.

“Your dear little cousin, Bellatrix …” The Dark Lord clicked his tongue softly. “So young, he is … I suspect he has no idea of the true meaning of pain … Because of you, he shall no longer be able to enjoy that naivety.”

Two voices spoke at the same time.

“*My Lord*, *I beg you* —!”

“It’s not his fault!”

Every bowed head jerked up in shock, Bellatrix faltering, as Greenwood leapt from the sofa and planted herself directly behind Regulus. She placed one hand on Rabastan’s shoulder on his right and the other on Crouch Jr’s on his left in some semblance of an embrace, reminiscent of a mother bear protecting her cubs.

“You said it yourself,” Greenwood said, “Bellatrix and Rodolphus were in charge of overseeing this task; its failure lies with them. The others have done nothing but follow their orders. They do not deserve to be punished for that.”

Nott started to stand, a dark look on his face; the Dark Lord held up a hand, signalling for him to sit back down. He stared at Greenwood, silently debating, and Severus knew that he was no longer the only one who was holding their breath.

“If they were to go unpunished, Lady Nott, then how do you expect them to learn?”

Greenwood glanced at Bellatrix and Rodolphus, then back again, decided.

“By bearing witness to it.”

Bellatrix made a sound of outrage, but the Dark Lord, too, had made his decision; his wand was drawn and aimed at her face before she could say, “My Lord,” and the room was soon filled by the sound of her agonised screams. In their fear, Rodolphus’ trembling increased tenfold and Rabastan, Regulus, and Crouch Jr appeared to be trying very hard not to give into the urge to hide themselves in Greenwood’s arms.

Severus wished he had left the Nott Estate when he had still had the chance. One look at Greenwood's hardened face as first Bellatrix and then Rodolphus were subjected to the Torture Curse, however, made him feel otherwise. He knew that she had no care for either Rabastan or Crouch Jr, but who she did clearly care about was Regulus, and the only argument to save Regulus from harm had been one that would save all three of them, as well as condemn Bellatrix and Rodolphus to the Dark Lord's wrath. To listen unflinchingly to their screams and remain unremorseful even after they had ended did not seem, to Severus, a very Gryffindor thing to do, but that was what she did.

Because the ends always justified the means, and Greenwood knew it. Somehow — most likely because Lily had deemed her good enough to befriend — this gave Severus strength. It did not matter what he had done or what he had yet to do; he felt sure that he could justify the means, so long as he got the ending right.

Chapter End Notes

Orvyn Shacklebolt is the OC I came up with to be the father of Dean Thomas — which you have no doubt guessed. He's said to have left Dean and his mother when Dean was just a baby, in an attempt to keep them safe from the war, and had later been killed by Death Eaters, and I wondered what he might've done to warrant that, besides marrying a Muggle. Seeing as Dean's a bit of an artist, the illustrator of political cartoons seemed appropriate — and I had a lot of fun coming up with the illustrations.

Wives with Knives

Chapter Summary

> An eye for an eye, a leg for a leg
> A shot in the heart doesn't make it un-break
> She really didn't wanna make it messy
> She really, really didn't, but the girl gone cray
> My baby's got a gun
> — Hayloft II, Mother Mother

Chapter Notes

> CW: implied/referenced attempted rape/non-con (except it never happened, we're just out here pulling a Narcissa Malfoy and lying to the Dark Lord), and three very long paragraphs written entirely in Shakespeare English that may or may not give you PTSD flashbacks of your secondary school English class.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Being confined to one's bed was not an enjoyable experience, Hermione decided on the first Saturday of August, having found herself confined there for two weeks more. It was terribly anxiety-inducing, which she very well knew bed rest was not supposed to be. She found herself not only unbearably bored, but a bewildering combination of tired and restless, never going more than a few wakeful minutes without worrying about what was happening on the other side of her bedroom door.

Crookshanks rested dutifully at her side, but she knew that he did not like being trapped there, either; it meant less time spent visiting Billy Stubbs the fern.

The first week Hermione spent in this version of confinement had, admittedly, been much worse. She had made herself sick more than once, and it had not had anything to do with pregnancy. The horror that had overcome her when she had heard Tavaris talking about killing Orvyn Shacklebolt's pregnant Muggle wife had not gone away when she had regained consciousness; she had been in such a panic upon awakening that Dinky had climbed on top of her to keep her from getting out of bed — to do what, Hermione had not known. All she had been able to think at that moment was that she had to do something, anything, and if she did not, the Dean Thomas of the future would cease to exist.

And it did not end there; the temporal reaction that would be triggered by his mother's death would also erase the existence of Dean's four younger half-siblings, his many nieces and

nephews, his ten-year-old son Matthew, and his six-year-old daughter Casey.

When Tavaris had finally come upstairs, Hermione had screamed at him, too terrified over the possibility of Dean's un-birth and the gut-wrenching idea that she had somehow messed up the timeline to lend some of that terror to the consequences of such an action. She had pleaded with him, her speech frantic and her breathing erratic, to have mercy on Mrs Thomas, and Tavaris had force-fed her a Calming Draught to shut her up before the Healer had arrived.

Calm and collected as she had appeared, however, Hermione had expected the Healer to still be suspicious of what might have led to her current circumstance.

This had not been the case.

Healer Hatley Gibbon — a narrow-faced witch with tight ringlets and a dignified demeanour — had remained excruciatingly unconcerned for the entirety of her visit. She had not inquired as to why Hermione had not been escorted to St Mungo's Hospital, nor had she so much as raised her eyebrows upon discovering that the daughter-in-law of the author of *Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy* kept a framed photograph on her bedside table of a known blood traitor and his Muggle-born wife on their wedding day, and another of all four Potters laughing merrily with the disowned, blood-traitor heir of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black — both of which blatantly displayed what many pure-bloods would call, "The fall of House Potter." At the very least, the sight of Tavaris sitting bedside and holding her hand should have garnered a reaction of some sort.

But, again, it had not, and this, to Hermione, had felt like a punch to the gut.

There were times in which she would forget just how alarming their age-gap was, because had it not been for the De-Ageing Potion, she would now be forty-two years old, making Tavaris no more than nine years her senior. However, she had taken the potion, so while she did not typically take notice of this age-gap, it was utterly irrefutable in the eyes of everyone else. When they looked at the two of them, they saw a fifty-two-year-old member of the gentry and his pregnant and orphaned nineteen-year-old wife.

Yet Healer Gibbon had greeted Tavaris with a smile and a politely-spoken, "How do you do, Lord Nott?" before proceeding to congratulate him on the excellent health of his unborn "heir," despite Hermione's fainting spell.

As it turned out, Healer Gibbon was the wife of the Death Eater Brinley Gibbon, as well as the sister of another, Maverick Jugson; therefore, she had either feigned obliviousness as she had looked Hermione over, or she had been entirely unsympathetic to her situation. It had left Hermione with an almost crushing sense of disappointment, because Healer Gibbon was not just a Healer; she was also a woman, and she had looked another woman in the eye and had done nothing to help her.

None of the Death Eaters' wives had.

In fairness, Hermione did not want their help, for she knew that time must go on as it had before so any aid she was potentially offered would have to be turned down, but that did not

mean it didn't still hurt.

Although Theodore had been given a clean bill of health, it had been suggested — to Tavaris and in front of Hermione — that the latter should be "taking better care of herself," and "spending more time resting," because "carrying the Nott heir is her number one responsibility and she ought to recognise that."

And that had been how Hermione had found herself on bed rest, the first time. While the word *bed* had certainly applied, the *rest* had most definitely not.

Because she knew, without a sliver of doubt, that Orvyn Shacklebolt, hiding in the Muggle world under the surname Thomas, was Dean's biological father. It had made so much sense; still a baby when he had left, Dean had never known his father, nor had he known if his father had been a wizard.

On top of that, Orvyn Shacklebolt made a living out of illustrating cartoons, and Dean, even at eleven years old, had proved to be quite the artist himself. Back in 2020, he had even been known for it. His name had, of course, cropped up in the news from time to time due to his role in Dumbledore's Army and his past-relationship with the wife of Harry Potter, but he had been better known for his illustrating of several children's books — most notably, a new edition of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* that had been released the June prior to Hermione going back in time — and for his paintings, all of which had depicted various scenes throughout the second wizarding war.

Those paintings had decorated the walls of many wizarding buildings in Britain, from *The Daily Prophet*'s main office to Dame Antonia's Library, to the Bard Theatre of Enchanting Dramatics, and even Hogwarts and the Ministry of Magic. In Hermione's own office, there had hung one of a group of Muggle-borns in heavy chains being manhandled onto the wooden ship that crossed the North Sea to Azkaban. Not exactly a pleasant image — truthfully, none of Dean's paintings had been — but looking at it had made her proud, because she knew the cells those Muggle-borns had once occupied had been filled by the very people who had put them there in the first place, and that no matter what the Dark Lord and his followers had done, those Muggle-borns had remained unbroken.

There had also been the bonus of the painting making a lot of people uncomfortable — the sort of people who would not have minded if the Muggle-borns had never been freed at all (namely, the absolute pain of a co-worker that was Atlas Adley) — as it had reminded them of precisely whose office they had been sitting in, and that their Minister for Magic ought not be trifled with.

On the evening of the attack, Hermione had been unable to stay in bed any longer, and a good thing, too, for had she not been present that night, it would not have been Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrange being tortured; it would have been Regulus.

Hermione did not know if she would have stood up to the Dark Lord as she had if it had been only Barty and Rabastan facing punishment. She thought she might have — hoped, even — because no matter what crimes Barty and Rabastan would go on to commit, they were still no older than seventeen, and seventeen-year-olds did not deserve to learn what happened after someone said, "*Crucio*."

When both Bellatrix and Rodolphus had finally been permitted to rise from the floor on shaking limbs and limp over to the nearest sofa to catch their breath, the Dark Lord had turned to Tavaris and said, "Tell your wife to go tuck in her children. I believe it's far surpassed their bedtime."

Regulus, Barty, and Rabastan had all trembled as Hermione had led them up to the second floor. As soon as Regulus had shut his door behind him, she had heard the rushed footsteps of him stampeding towards the ensuite; on top of his trembling, Barty's eyes had been darting about frantically, wide and manic, reminding her of a drug addict right before the worst of the withdrawal hit; and Rabastan had not been able to stop pacing until she had summoned Dinky to fetch him a Calming Draught, at which point he had slumped onto the drawing-room sofa and had not moved for two straight hours. Only once Bellatrix and Rodolphus had recovered enough to accompany Rabastan home had Hermione retired for the night, at last allowing herself to soak in the insurmountable relief that Mrs Thomas had gone unharmed.

And then had come the start of her second bed rest, because, apparently, standing up to the Dark Lord was a prime example of overexerting oneself.

Hermione drummed her fingers against her thigh, glancing at the small clock which sat on her bedside table; it was half-past six o'clock. She stared further, waiting for the minute hand to reach the *12*, but the clock could apparently sense her impatience and seemed to move twice as slowly just to spite her. Shooting it a glare, she climbed out of bed, regardless, careful not to dislodge Crookshanks.

It was at seven o'clock that evening that Tavaris had agreed to allow her off bed rest. Why he had decided to give her such a specific time rather than a more reasonable number of days should have been a mystery to her, but it was not; she knew him well enough by now to know that it had been for his own amusement — to spite her, like the clock. He had most certainly imagined her sat there, glaring at it, and laughed to himself.

According to Dinky, the Nott Estate was playing host to three guests that weekend, one of whom was Snape, and Hermione was permitted to join them for dinner in the informal dining room, meaning that the guests could not have been all that important. Nevertheless, it would not do to attend in her dressing gown, so she began picking through her wardrobe for fresh clothes.

The identities of the other two guests were unknown to her; Dinky had slipped away before she could ask. Given that Snape was among their group, she considered a couple of wizards who were also interested in spell-creation to be a reasonable assumption. It was questionable, though, that they had been invited to spend the entirety of the weekend at the estate. *Perhaps they live outside of England,* she thought. *Maybe they're holding their own little conference on spell-creation.*

"What do you think, Crookshanks?" she said, turning to face the bed. She held up indigo, silver-embroidered robes, which were among the many articles of clothing that had been recently altered by Dinky — again. "Or shall I go with the one with lilies on it?"

Raising his head from where it rested on his forepaws, Crookshanks scrutinised the robes, then transferred his gaze to the vase of royal lilies on the vanity. After a moment of debate, he

got up, stretching, and hopped off the bed to paw at the hem of the robes.

"Yes, I agree," said Hermione with a nod, and then she, too, glanced quizzically at the lilies. "That tactic *is* growing a bit old, isn't it?" She pursed her lips in thought, distractedly lifting the robes out of Crookshanks' reach so he wouldn't tear them. "I suppose I could … Oh! Oh, that's brilliant! Dinky?" she added hopefully.

There was a *pop*, and Dinky materialised at the centre of the room, slinging a rag over their shoulder. They gave Hermione a flat look.

"Dinky is preparing dinner for Master Tavaris' guests, Mistress. Dinky does be enjoying Mistress Mione's antics, but I gots no time for them tonight."

"Sorry," she winced. "Erm — would Goppy happen to be available, then?" The moment the words left her mouth, a second *pop* brought Goppy to stand at Dinky's side. "Oh. I didn't disturb you, did I, Goppy?"

"No, Mistress is not disturbing old Goppy," Goppy said in a croaky voice. "Goppy just be polishing the silver." He pouted at the floor, adding morosely, "Goppy always be polishing the silver."

Crookshanks slunk over to rub his head against one of Goppy's stick-like legs in sympathy.

"I have an alternative task for you, if you'd like," Hermione told him tentatively.

Goppy's face lit up.

"Yes, Mistress," he said eagerly, "Goppy is liking that very much. Very much, indeed."

"Then I goes away now." Dinky shot Goppy a sardonic look. "Yous gonna be having good, happy, sneaky time, Goppy, but yous gonna be *so* e'sperated by Mistress Mione." They turned to Hermione then, and added sternly, "You best be sitting right down if yous tired, Mistress."

Before Hermione could reply, Dinky was gone. She blinked at Goppy, and Goppy blinked back, waiting.

"Right," she said after a second, giving her head a little shake. "How much shampoo do you think you could reasonably obtain within the next few hours?"

"As much as Mistress likes."

"Would it be possible to place … all of it … in the guest room Snape is currently staying in?"

"Oh, yes. Goppy is noticing that, too," he nodded gravely. "You is very kind for helping Mr Snape with his little problem, Mistress." Dropping his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, he added, "Dinky be soaking his sheets in soap for *three hours* when Dinky takes them."

Hermione let out a noise of startled amusement, quickly pressing her hand to her mouth. This was yet another tidbit she would have to share with Ron and Harry when she saw them again.

Indeed, Snape was a hero in the future, and they had all been appreciative of that, especially Harry, who had fought to have Snape's portrait hung in the Headmaster's Office at Hogwarts; however, he had still been Snape, who was certainly no hero now, and Hermione and Ron had never forgotten how cruel he had been to them. Really, professors who took five points from one of their students for being "an insufferable know-it-all" had no right to be teaching children.

When Goppy left to hunt down "so, so, *so* many scents, as many as Goppy can get his hands on," Hermione returned to the task of readying for dinner, chatting with (to) Crookshanks as she did. She had not spoken to her cat nearly so often in the future, only ever to coo at or admonish him, and perhaps the reason she was now having entirely one-sided conversations with him was that she had lost her mind a little bit. It did not seem like the sort of behaviour that could be blamed on her underdeveloped frontal lobe, nor on her pregnancy hormones, so she settled on it being a product of her loneliness and left it at that, rising from the vanity to approach her desk.

Pulling open the top-left drawer, Hermione took out a periwinkle leather-bound journal, the Nott crest emblazoned on the front, so new the spine was not yet cracked, and the pages still laid flat, their corners unbent. Dinky had gotten it, at her request, on the third day of her second bed rest, and she had begun taking notes on all that she was determined to remember, but that also would not incite Tavaris' suspicion.

The first page contained a rewritten schedule of his rotation of guests; the next seven were filled by a recounting of her second graduation day, prior to the point at which she had been captured, and included both a paraphrased version of the speech given by Lily and James and descriptions of Fleamont and Euphemia Potter and Lyall and Hope Lupin that were as in-depth as she could make them; the ten following pages detailed what she knew of Lily and James' relationship; and after that, there were eight pages on her Christmas spent with the Evans'.

Then the notes on Orvyn Shacklebolt began, because the Dark Lord still planned on having Mrs Thomas murdered, and Hermione could not let that happen. Every bit of information she could gather on Orvyn had been jotted down straight from the records Tavaris had of him, which she had, inexplicably but no less thankfully, been given permission to borrow. The following three pages contained forged evidence of a rather intense brainstorming session, finally ending with the conclusion that Orvyn himself should be murdered, and his wife and son should be left to long for the reason behind his sudden abandonment of them.

An explanation for this conclusion was provided at the bottom of the twenty-ninth page of the journal.

His son will be left unaware of the existence of the magical world until the day he receives his Hogwarts acceptance letter; he will think himself Muggle-born, and unworthy of a father who sticks around. A crueller fate than the alternative.

Hermione planned to share this so-called idea with the Dark Lord; she had a feeling he would agree with that last bit.

Turning to the next page, presently blank, she picked up her quill, dipping it in the inkwell that sat on her desk, and wrote down what Goppy had told her about Dinky fretting over the state of the sheets Snape dared to rest his head on. Once finished, she twisted to glance at the clock, and instead found her gaze drawn to the other contents of her right bedside table; gathered about the clock were the photographs she had collected of the Potter family, and one new addition of Frank and Alice Longbottom on their wedding day, taken from the *Prophet* the day before. They looked just as happy as Lily and James had on their own wedding day, and she decided that all three photographs would accompany her and the journal when she returned to the future. Until then, however, she was still playing the role of Lady Nott, and the clock finally read seven o'clock; she had a dinner with Death Eaters to attend.

As Hermione tucked her journal away and rose from her desk, she and Theodore both decided that they would be most displeased if there was no treacle tart for dessert.

"Bed rest is officially over, Crookshanks," she said, opening her door with a sigh; Crookshanks wasted no time in trotting out into the hall, his bottle-brush tail swishing eagerly behind him. "Say, 'Hello,' to Billy for me."

Being a cat, Crookshanks offered no verbal response, and was already hastening down the wide staircase, gone before Hermione reached the ground floor. Granted, it did take her a rather long time to descend the stairs these days, and her lower-back was aching as she crossed the front hall; she stopped at the first archway to rub the tender muscle, grimacing.

Voices reached her ears from the informal dining room, all of them male. She picked up on Tavaris' first, light and airy yet so frequently dark and deep, then caught Snape's low baritone, his words unnecessarily drawn out, reminding her of the truly awful film that was her mother's guilty pleasure: *Rocky Horror Picture Show*; Hermione could almost hear Tim Curry in her head, practically purring, "*I see you shiver with antici…pation.*" The memory brought a smile to her face, which lingered as she straightened, letting her hand fall to her side.

But then, Hermione identified a third voice, this one sneering, and her smile slipped.

"— weren't for Albus Dumbledore, perhaps Hogwarts' own Dark Arts class could be reinstated. But then again, it *is* Hogwarts, so perhaps not."

"When the Dark Lord takes his natural place as the leader of wizarding Britain," Tavaris said, "the return of Dark Arts will be among the first alterations made to the Hogwarts curriculum. Have no fear, Igor; the next generation of witches and wizards who are *pure* enough and *worthy* enough to attend our great school will all be trained in the Dark Arts."

"Precisely, Nott — *future* generations," Igor Karkaroff said pointedly. "The Dark Arts have not been taught there since the eighteenth century. Had you attended Durmstrang like ourselves, your knowledge of the Dark Arts would undoubtedly be *twice* as vast as it currently is."

This can't be supposed to happen, Hermione thought. *There's no way.* In exchange for his release from Azkaban, Igor Karkaroff had given the names of five other Death Eaters: Snape, Augustus Rookwood, Eamon Travers, Angus Mulciber, Antonin Dolohov, and Evan Rosier; he had said nothing about Tavaris Nott.

"My knowledge of the Dark Arts came from the writings of my forefathers, *Igor* —" Tavaris voice was now more dark and deep than it was light and airy, "— and I guarantee you that I learned far more from them than I ever would have at *Durmstrang*."

Just as Hermione forced herself onward, her mind racing to find an explanation, she heard the voice of the final guest, and froze before the threshold of the room, feeling the blood drain from her face.

"*Yes*, but you've been tasked to teach this boy here because he's been denied that aspect of his education. My mama says the British think the Dark Arts are the work of *d'yavol* — the devil — and she's right, isn't she?"

Spell-creation, she thought numbly, a cold terror washing over her, further freezing her to the spot. Her heart began to speed up, pounding against her chest as though attempting to escape — to abandon her and flee so that it might save itself, uncaring of what would happen to her if it did. *Death Eaters who specialise in spell-creation.*

It was Karkaroff who noticed her standing there, his seat halfway down the table set with silver, his back to the curtained window. He wore a smile that did not reach his frigid eyes, his weak chin only partially covered by a goatee that was not yet flecked with grey.

"You must be the little wife," he said, in a manner that was almost friendly, "is that right?"

Hermione still did not move.

"Mione, come sit," she heard Tavaris call, and when she did not answer, he added enticingly, "Dinky promised treacle tart for dessert."

"What did you do to the girl, Nott?" chuckled Karkaroff, his gaze refusing to waver. "I'd heard she was intelligent — a weapon Albus Dumbledore couldn't be allowed access to — but all I see is a terrified child with one of her own on the way."

"Have you turned her into a timid little rabbit, Nott?" There was a laugh, stronger and throatier than that of Karkaroff, and Hermione's throat constricted. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

A chair dragged against the rug beneath the table as someone stood, and the *thud* that followed told her it was Tavaris.

"Believe me when I tell you, Antonin," he said ruefully, "my wife is anything but *timid*."

Snape — it really couldn't have been anyone else — snorted.

Tavaris appeared at the edge of Hermione's vision, one eyebrow raised as he peered at her, suddenly nonplussed. After a moment, he took hold of her arm, drawing it through his own

without struggle, and prompted her into the room. Her steps were staggered and stiff, her muscles straining themselves in their fight to remain frozen, and she felt as though she were a marionette, moving only when Tavaris pulled on her strings.

Across from Karkaroff sat Snape, who turned his head to watch her enter; he, too, raised an eyebrow at her behaviour. The seat to his right was empty, reserved, it would seem, for herself, so that Tavaris could have her beside him. Her arm was released, falling limply, and she watched dumbly as Tavaris pulled out her chair; with another nudge, she sank into it.

The sound of Tavaris retaking his seat was oddly distorted.

"Not timid?" There was another laugh. "*Glaza boyatsya*, my mama likes to say — the eyes are afraid. Why so afraid, girlie? Do the big men scare you?"

With painstaking slowness, Hermione raised her head to look at the long, twisted face of the dark-haired wizard who sat opposite her.

Antonin Dolohov smiled crookedly, leering.

"Mione, this is Antonin Dolohov," Tavaris said, and by his voice alone she could tell that he was watching her closely. "And the wizard beside him is Igor Karkaroff."

Just as Karkaroff's gaze had not wavered, nor did Hermione's; once on Dolohov, it did not move. Even a somersault-like movement from Theodore did not disrupt her focus.

You tried to kill me, she thought as she stared, *and I was a child.*

"English is not my first language," Dolohov said, glancing at Tavaris while gesturing to Hermione with his fork, "but I still speak better than this one."

Tavaris did not deign to give him a response, but instead prodded Hermione's foot under the table and said, his voice low, "Eat, Mione."

Her hand moved mechanically to where her cutlery laid, lined neatly on either side of her plate, from which rose a smell that she easily identified as that of Dinky's second-best roast.

Dolohov glanced at Karkaroff this time, his expression one of mild amusement.

You tried to kill Remus, too, and you succeeded.

It was her steak knife that Hermione's fingers curled around, steadily tightening on the hard silver in a grasp that was not quite right. Her trembling continued, visible to everyone at the table, but it was no longer out of fear.

He had a wife who fled her safehouse to help him, and she died, because you killed him.

The conversation continued, their attention leaving her as they returned to the subject they had been discussing previously, and now she could scarcely hear them at all, not over the blood rushing in her ears.

He had a son waiting for him at home, and that son is an orphan, because you killed him.

A few emphasised words and unfinished sentences managed to reach her, but no more than that. Minutes passed and their forks and knives scraped against their plates as they ate, and still her gaze did not waver.

Tonks had been meant to stay home, out of harm's way with her mother and new-born son, but instead she had been racing through the castle corridors in search of Remus, her own safety disregarded in the wake of her desperation; it was on the path to the courtyard, where he had been spotted last, that she had run in to Bellatrix.

Remus had been duelling Dolohov, before and perhaps still, when Tonks came looking for him, but he had been struck down by a curse of Dolohov's own creation before he could so much as catch one final glimpse of her; he had died under the belief that she was still someplace safe.

They had been reunited on the floor of the Great Hall, surrounded by bodies just as still as their own, a mere twenty-one days after their son had been born.

As Hermione watched Dolohov now, her eyes tracking each one of his movements no matter how small or insignificant they might have been, she thought of Teddy. She thought of how she had changed more of his nappies than either of his parents had; of how she had kissed his skinned knee better when he had fallen in the orchard behind the Burrow; of how she had given him a copy of *Hogwarts: A History* for his eleventh birthday and he had rolled his eyes and told her that he had already read it; of how she had given an embarrassment-inducing lecture on safe practices to both him and her niece, Victoire, after finding them behind the broom-shed at the Potters' with their hands in places they should not have been; and of how she had watched from the sea of parents as he had given a speech to his fellow graduates, the Head Boy badge on his chest gleaming in the late-June sun.

She thought of the time that Teddy had accidentally called Harry, "Dad," and found her grip tightening further around her knife, her hand raising seemingly of its own volition —

One of Dolohov's arms was extended, his left hand resting on the centre of the table while he ate with his right, his head turned away as he laughed at something Karkaroff had just said, and Tavaris seized Hermione's wrist a second too late, her knife already slicing through flesh and hitting the hard wood of the table below.

It was beyond satisfying to hear Dolohov scream.

*

The third bed rest luckily came with reading material.

When Hermione woke the following morning, after having been, for the first time, taken out by a Stunning Spell rather than a Sleeping Draught, it was to find Tavaris sitting on the edge of her bed — less than a foot away from where she lay — and tucking away his wand; she guessed that he had just cast the Reviving Spell in order to wake her himself. Before either her rage or fear were given a chance to return, her gaze was drawn to the alluringly massive

tome in his lap; while its pages were yellow with age and its brown leather cover was worn soft, the gold of its gilding appeared untouched by time, shining in the light of her chandelier.

“It’s time you learned the history of our house.”

Hermione glanced up; once again, Tavaris was watching her closely. He wore a vague expression of mingled suspicion and apprehension, but his eyes, narrowed slightly, gleamed with interest.

“Perhaps a little research will help distract you from your apparent desire to slit Antonin Dolohov’s throat in his sleep.”

“He’s still here, then, I take it?” Hermione said. Her fists had automatically clenched on the duvet, bunching up the material.

Tavaris hummed slightly in confirmation. “For a day longer,” he told her. “Severus was able to heal his hand to avoid any lasting damage, but I suspect that pleases you about as much as his prolonged presence does.”

He scrutinised her for a moment, then carefully transferred the hefty tome from his lap to her own.

“The Malfoys like to brag about being descended from William the Conqueror, aiming to impress with their supposedly *ancient* lineage … however, William the Conqueror did not arrive in England until ten-sixty-six. The Notts came over from Germany seventy-six years prior to that point.” He tapped the tome with his forefinger. “This is a written history of House Nott. I’d like for you to have its contents memorised, especially since you shall one day be teaching it to Theodore.”

Hermione released the duvet to tentatively trace the golden crest emblazoned on the cover of the tome. She shot him a wary look, unable to comprehend why she had not yet been punished. Surely, bedrest would not be the only consequence she faced for stabbing a Death Eater?

Seeming to have read her thoughts, although she was confident that he could not, Tavaris said, “Last night’s incident has not gone overlooked, Mione. You will be questioned on the reason behind your actions.” Taking hold of his walking-stick, he rose from the bed, and added, “It just won’t be me who you’re answering to.”

With that, he left the bedroom, and she heard the *click* of the door locking behind him.

A weight settled in the pit of her stomach. If it would not be Tavaris from whom she received her punishment, then that left only one other possibility: a possibility which had her rapidly filling with dread.

Drawing a shaky breath, Hermione opened the tome, intending to direct her attention elsewhere to save herself from falling into a panic. Like the cover, the first page held no more than the image of the Nott family crest, but on the second, she was met with a curling scrawl, smoothly printed in black ink. Willing her hands to stop trembling, she began to read.

HOUSE OF NOTT

Potentia in Silentio — Power ‘i Silence

Lord Theomund Nott, first of his nameth, wast b’rn ‘i the bitter cold wintar a hunnert bef’re i doth anon liveth ‘i Germania of the Holy Roman Empire. yond l’rd wast too first of the Notts to setteth foot on the soils of the Kingdom of England, although then twas Albion, and yond l’rd beest ’mongst the Anglo-Saxon settlement, which didst stretcheth VI hunnerts. yond l’rd arriv’d ‘i the lenton season by nay chance the fruitful lent the most wondrous Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry didst beest found, f’r yond l’rd hadst been lur’d to these valorous soils ‘i curiosity. at the timeth of his arrival ‘i Caledonia we knoweth beest Scotland, Lord Theomund I wast unpractis’d ‘i Olde English; yond l’rd spake only High German, known eke as Hochdeutsch, so yond l’rd elect’d to remaineth silent. the act of silence didst teach of the pow’r t didst holdeth, f’r those ‘round hath grown unsettl’d ‘i the absence of speech, f’rev’r their hath rais’d guardeth and wond’r ov’r what yond l’rd may beest bethinking, f’r those hilding gents w’re quiv’ring cowards of most wondrous measureth. although yond l’rd didst at lasteth learneth to readeth and writeth ‘i Olde English, so nev’rtheless vow’d to keepeth yond silence f’rev’rm’re, which didst earneth the motto of House Nott: Potentia ‘i Silentio.

‘i his timeth ‘i the Kingdom, Lord Theomund I wast off’r’d a lodging at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, lending valorous aide to Salazar Slytherin ‘i his teachings of the Wielding of Wands and the Art of the Dark, f’r t wast Slytherin who is’t s’rv’d as the only wizard to possesseth the ability to seeth ‘i the mind of Lord Theomund I by means of his art ‘i the practiceth of Legilimency. Slytherin beest writ to has’t didst share many a conv’rsation with Lord Theomund I within the confines of their two most wondrous minds. t ‘i that gent who is’t didst teach Lord Theomund I the divine imp’rtance of the purity of magical blood, hence that gent didst rescueth House Nott by his warning to protecteth their bloodline from being sulli’d by those folk most unw’rthy of Wand Living. at which hour Slytherin tooketh his leaveth from Hogwarts ‘i the waketh of the rising hostility between t’s four Houses, that gent hath left behind a lett’r to Lord Theomund I which didst describeth one enshielf chamb’r home to a Magnificent Beast; this beast, that gent confid’d, wouldst one day beest awaken’d by a descendent of Slytherin and wouldst so crisp the school of all those folk unw’rthy of t’s teachings. as such, Lord Theomund I didst remain at Hogwarts, awaiting the day yond Heir of Slytherin arriv’d to fulfil his Destiny.

whence mine own hunnert didst beest known, Lord Theomund I tooketh a jointress by the nameth Mistress Cecillia, and yond l’rd didst anon fath’r a son and two daught’rs, nam’d those w’re Theomund II, Eawynn and Sweterun. until Lord Theomund I didst die and yond l’rd’s title didst pass to Lord Theomund II, mine own House didst liveth ‘i the toweth’rs of the Most Wondrous Caledonian Castle of Hogwarts, i’ pursuit of their owneth wisdom whilst those nobles await’d the fulfilment of Slytherin’s Destiny. Lord Theomund II hadst hath built an estate f’r his House amongst the f’rests of Snottingaham by the Snotta inga ham, which beest a village nam’d for the Magbob warlord Snotta. ‘i his envy of yond unworthy nameth, Lord Cerdic Nott, who beest grandson of Lord Theomund Nott II and Heir of Lord Fridolph Nott, Bewitch’d the Magbobs of the Snotta inga ham, who is’t hadst no more brain than

stone, to bethink their home beest nam'd Nottingham, 'i high hon'r of the Pow'rful and Silent House of Nott. 'i the hunnert to followeth, yond l'rd's heir who beest nam'd Lord Alwin Nott didst has't hath built an estate m're, which beest one large sir'r hath call'd Nottingham Hall.

Hermione had to pause then, her head spinning. Thinking she must have interpreted the passage incorrectly, she returned to the top and reread it at a slower pace. When she finished, she sat back against her pillows with her mouth hanging half-open, struck dumb.

According to history as Muggles told it, the name of the English county Snottingaham had naturally changed over time, shortening to something simpler and easier to say, but, apparently, that had not been the case; a member of the Nott family — Cerdic Nott — had cast some sort of Compulsion Charm on each and every one of the Muggles who had lived there, tricking them into calling it Nottingham instead, after himself.

For heaven's sake, Hermione thought, scoffing in disbelief. She rubbed her eyes wearily, then looked back down at the page. The second estate mentioned — Nottingham Hall — must have been the other property Tavaris owned, which he had boasted about being far grander than Malfoy Manor. If the first estate was the one in which the two of them now resided, then Nottingham Hall could not have been very far away; it was in the same county. Was Nottingham really where she had been all this time?

A third run-through of the passage left her with a perfect understanding of just what had made Tavaris spring for the opportunity to join the Dark Lord; long ago, the Notts had been told by Salazar Slytherin himself that an heir would one day come to cleanse (she guessed this was what was meant by the word *crisp*) the school of anyone he deemed unworthy of magic, and ever since, generation after generation of Notts had been lying in wait, preparing for the day that Slytherin's foretelling would come true. When a young Tom Riddle had told the first of his followers about his heritage and proceeded to open the Chamber of Secrets and release the basilisk within it, an equally young Tavaris had already studied the information Hermione now read; he had joined the Dark Lord with the knowledge that it was what his family had spent centuries waiting for.

Had it been a Nott who started the rumour of Slytherin's hidden chamber and the monster it held?

Hermione was in need of a very strong cup of tea.

By the time the clock on her bedside table read five o'clock, she was only two-thirds of the way into the tome and had just gotten to the pages upon pages of the Nott family tree. Her eyes were burning so fiercely that she had to blink several times before she was able to focus on her current page, and it was then that she decided there was absolutely no chance of her reading the whole family tree; sighing, she skipped ahead to where the most recent generations were listed.

Theomund Elric Nott VIII, son of Grindel II; father of Torsten, Grindel III & Wilfred

April 24, 1804 — February 29, 1910

Beomia Marion Nott née Macmillan, wife of Theomund VIII

October 9, 1821 — October 6, 1899

Torsten Theomund Nott, son of Theomund VIII; father of Cantankerus III

March 3, 1842 — December 17, 1939

Grindel Fridolph Nott III, son of Theomund VIII; father of Theomund IX

May 18, 1850 — August 10, 1954

Wilfred Leopold Nott, son of Theomund VIII; father of Tate & Rawdon

August 19, 1853 — November 1, 1951

Eldride Annis Nott née Rowle, wife of Torsten

November 10, 1867 — August 11, 1921

Diera Ardith Nott née Travers, wife of Grindel III

April 5, 1881 — November 1, 1951

Adalaide Celine Nott née Ballestrem, wife of Wilfred

January 11, 1890 —

Cantankerus Torsten Nott III, son of Torsten; father of Tavaris

June 2, 1886 — March 23, 1975

Theomund Grindel Nott IX, son of Grindel III; father of Terric

February 13, 1901 —

Tate Ida Nott, daughter of Wilfred; wife of Theomund IX

October 27, 1906 —

Rawdon Manfred Nott, son of Wilfred; father of Barnett & Odelyn

December 23, 1906 —

Udela Cordelia Nott née Yaxley, wife of Cantankerus III

April 17, 1901 — September 8, 1937

Tavaris Cantankerus Nott, son of Cantankerus III

August 29, 1926 —

Terric Theomund Nott, son of Theomund IX

July 6, 1928 —

Aleena Kalliope Nott née Galatis, wife of Rawdon

November 17, 1910 —

Barnett Alain Nott, son of Rawdon; father of Delany

March 31, 1943 —

Harolyn Petra Nott née Bibra, wife of Terric

May 15, 1930 —

Odelyn Rhea Nott, daughter of Rawdon

June 30, 1951 —

Gisela Harolyn Nott, daughter of Terric

May 23, 1958 —

Ivette Sylvie Nott née Alarie, wife of Barnett

September 9, 1949 —

Delany Bastien Nott, son of Barnett

March 18, 1976 —

And then, at the very end:

Mione Nott née Greenwood, wife of Tavaris

September 17, 1959 —

For a long time, Hermione did nothing but stare at her name — the one she had given herself, anyway. It was surreal, seeing the evidence of her presence in this time within the pages of a written history. That no woman on the family tree had been deemed significant enough to receive the title of *mother* caused only a faint indignation that hovered at the back of her

head; she was too struck by the thin, winding letters in which her name had been printed to take any real notice of it.

That's me, she thought, over and over again, unable to move past it. *I'm here.*

Even in the future, the evidence of her presence in this time could be found, if one knew where to look. How many pure-blood children had studied this family tree and seen her name on it? It was a practice forced upon many who were born into more old-fashioned (prejudiced) pure-blood families: studying the recent family trees of those with whom their own family interacted. According to Albus Severus, Scorpius knew both the Potter and Weasley family trees better than he did; he had asked one day, while they were all gathered at the Burrow for Sunday dinner, if having Blacks who weren't named *Sirius* on their tree meant he wasn't the first one in their family to have been sorted into Slytherin.

Could Hermione reasonably assume that Scorpius had read her name, too? That Draco had? She suddenly wished she had taken it upon herself to study the same family trees, for if she had, she would know when she was going to escape — she would know when she made it back to the future. It would have been so easy to just pick up a book and find the name that hovered directly above Theodore's.

It would have been so easy to just read the rest of his file.

The *click* of her bedroom door unlocking wrenched Hermione from her thoughts. Her head jerked up, her shoulders rising tensely. Dinky would have simply Apparated in and Tavaris was still occupied with his guests, so the person at her door could only be —

"Ah, Lady Nott," the Dark Lord said in greeting, wandering into her bedroom with such ease that one might have thought it was his own. He glanced about disinterestedly, his eyes landing on the chair at her desk; drawing his wand, he gave it a small, almost lazy wave, sending the chair gliding across the floor towards her. Without returning his wand to his pocket, he approached her bed and lowered himself onto the chair with the utmost calm, his knees spread wide apart and his legs crossed at the ankles.

Hermione watched, scarcely breathing, as he idly traced the frames on her bedside table. The corner of his lips turned up in a slight smirk, and he moved his finger to hover over the photograph of the Potter family on that past Christmas, right where Sirius was throwing his head back in laughter.

"Do you ever find yourself imagining," the Dark Lord said lightly, "what he would say if he knew that his brother bore my Mark?"

Hermione pursed her lips.

"'The bloody fool is a fucking fanatic.'"

He looked at her, one eyebrow raised inquiringly.

"He suspects …" she murmured, "has for a while."

The Dark Lord nodded, a slight tilt to his head.

“And yet he’s made no move to report young Regulus to the Auror Office,” he mused. “Curious … don’t you think?”

He was watching her just closely as Tavaris had been earlier that day, if not more so. It unsettled her, but then again, what about the Dark Lord wasn’t unsettling?

“I don’t find it curious at all, actually,” said Hermione. “Estranged or not, Regulus is still his brother, and Sirius …” She glanced at the photograph, heavy with grief. “Sirius isn’t Bellatrix.”

“And Regulus? Which of them would you say he takes after the most? His brother … or Bellatrix?”

“Neither,” she said after a moment. She looked back at the Dark Lord and, unwonted, told the truth. “I’d say he’s most like Narcissa.”

This seemed to please him, but, of course, he did not know that Narcissa would eventually betray him to save her son.

“You know him well, Sirius Black … do you not? Even if you were so much *closer* to the son of Lyall Lupin.”

Hermione drew anxious circles round the emerald of her wedding ring. For a while, she was silent, until finally, taking a deep breath, she said abruptly, “I have an idea regarding Orvyn Shacklebolt’s — erm — fate.”

“Is that so?”

She nodded, trying to ignore the stinging in her eyes.

“I am aware that you wanted to — that you want to give him a warning but — I don’t believe killing his wife is the best option.”

The Dark Lord narrowed his eyes, appearing inexplicably interested in hearing what Hermione might suggest. With a small jerk of his wand, he gestured for her to go on.

“She’s pregnant, and that child — their son — will be born a wizard. If Orvyn’s living under a pseudonym, it’s very likely that his wife has no idea of the magical world, and therefore —” she hastily wiped away a stray tear, forging on, “— if Orvyn were to die, she would assume he’s abandoned them, and her son will eventually join the magical world under the impression that he is Muggle-born, when really he comes from a family in the Sacred Twenty-Eight.”

His eyes glinted, the red in them seeming to burn for a second, and then he nodded his head consideringly, somehow at ease again.

“What a creative idea,” he said, his lips twitching. “I wonder how you came up with it.”

Hermione decided that it would be best not to reply to that, but let her shoulders relax at the knowledge that he would likely be acting on her suggestion, even if that meant she had just signed Orvyn Shacklebolt's death warrant.

With a sigh that sounded strangely amused, the Dark Lord shifted in his seat, resting his elbows on the arms of the chair, gently tapping his wand on his thigh. Another moment passed before he spoke again.

"I must admit to being quite taken aback when Tavaris informed me of your little outburst yesterday evening. It is not often that someone fears one of my followers more than they do myself. It makes me wonder what could have incited such a strong reaction. Might you be able to enlighten me?"

Hermione lowered her head to watch her thumb continue to circle the emerald, almost of its own accord, and allowed her eyes to go unfocused as she slipped into her mind. She searched for the memory of facing Dolohov in the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, and once she found it, she searched for the scene with which it had been replaced.

She raised her head again, permitting no resistance as the Dark Lord pressed into her mind to witness it for himself.

What he found was a sixteen-year-old Mione Greenwood slumped against the wall of a darkened alleyway, her limbs heavy and her eyes drowsy on account of the tiny ingredient that she had not realised had been added to her drink; while her name was called by more than one worried voice near the entrance of a pub, she fearfully watched the leering approach of a tall man decades older than herself, his hair dark and his face pale and twisted, and although there was a resemblance between him and Dolohov, they were very clearly not the same person.

The Dark Lord waved the scene away, letting it drift into the vast sea of countless others, but he did not retreat. With great concentration, Hermione allowed a different memory to break the surface of the rolling waves, attracting his attention; this one was of a girl pinning her to the tiled floor of a lavatory, her wild, black curls dancing over Mione's face as she hit her repeatedly, shouting that Mione had stolen her boyfriend and refusing to believe her when Mione cried out in denial. Once he had discarded this, too, Hermione presented him with the unmodified memory of her first encounter with Bellatrix in this time. She could sense his continued amusement as the scene played out, but when it came to an end, he still did not leave; he drifted along with it, straight into the waves that now crashed in the wake of Hermione's trepidation.

It was unclear how long a time the Dark Lord spent perusing her collection of memories. When he had at last withdrawn from the depths of her mind, he had viewed Mulciber and Avery Jr's attempted assault, Remus' first drunken request for a kiss, Bilius' promise ring slipping onto her finger, the troll-like boy accosting Mione in a school lavatory, Sirius being dragged away from Regulus before he could draw his wand after Gryffindor beat Slytherin in a Quidditch match, Monica Greenwood ordering Mione in fluent French to fetch a bottle of white wine to pair with their seafood dinner, the flames that had swallowed Mione's childhood home and all those within it, and finally, her arrival at the Headmaster's Office at

Hogwarts, in which she was comforted over the death of her family by an elderly man whom she did not yet know.

Hermione's head throbbed as though it had a pulse of its own, her breath came in short pants, her eyes were watering again, and she suspected that Theodore was entwining her internal organs as if braiding a friendship bracelet.

After a long silence, the Dark Lord said, "What a terrible life you've lived." He sounded infinitely satisfied.

"Is — is that all?" she asked breathlessly, her fingertips pressed against her temples. "Or do you wish to see more?"

"No, that will be all," he said, in a voice so airily pleasant that it reminded her of Professor Dumbledore when he spoke as if he were commenting on the weather. The Dark Lord rose from the chair, sending it back to its proper place with another lazy wave of his wand. "Rest now, Lady Nott. You've a little heir growing inside you; it would not do to overexert yourself. Oh, and," he added, nearly at the door, "in the future, do try to avoid stabbing my Death Eaters."

The second that Hermione was alone again, she leaned over the side of her bed and vomited onto the floor.

After that day, Dinky cut up her food before serving it, and Tavaris did not allow her off bed rest until September.

Chapter End Notes

In Old English, no one capitalised the first letter of their sentences, hence why there was a severe lack of a capitalisation in that passage, but what they did capitalise was the first letter of words on which they wanted to place emphasis. In case you found this passage unclear, all that you'd maybe want to know that wasn't pointed out by Hermione is that the Notts gained their motto due to Theomund Nott I (the first Nott to arrive in the UK) not knowing English and deciding to just say absolutely nothing to anyone at all; by doing this, he freaked people out, henceforth deciding to never speak again, and developed a friendship with Salazar Slytherin because — due to his skill in Legilimency — Slytherin was the only one who could ever tell what he was thinking. He also helped Slytherin teach his students — sound familiar?

And yes, I decided that a Nott named Nottingham after himself — it really was Snottingaham, originally, but that doesn't really have a nice ring to it, does it?

An itty bitty dictionary for that passage:
hunnert — hundred (no such thing as century back then)
wintar — winter
lenton — spring

Albion — England before it was England
Caledonia — Scotland before it was Scotland
Germania of the Holy Roman Empire — Germany before it was Germany
yond l'rd/that gent — he
most wondrous — great
-eth — completely unnecessary add-on to most words
eke — as
enshielf — hidden
crisp — cleanse
jointress — wife
anon — soon

Theodore Tavaris William Nott

Chapter Summary

I wasn't ready then, I'm ready now
I'm heading straight for you
You will only be eternally
The one that I belong to
— Sweetest Devotion, Adele

Chapter Notes

As you've probably guessed by the chapter title — new character alert:)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Pansy Parkinson was born on October the twenty-fifth. The news reached Hermione by way of Narcissa, who had taken to visiting her for tea every week since she had learned she was pregnant to discuss exactly that at great length. Still maintaining that early pregnancy glow and without swollen ankles or an aching back, Narcissa was practically giddy with excitement over Pansy's birth, and uncharacteristically vocal about it.

Hermione, meanwhile, had a belly she thought was probably not far off from the size of Hagrid's head, could no longer reasonably call her walk a "walk," for all she seemed currently capable of was a pathetic little waddle, and — had she still been permitted access to knives — would have gladly stabbed anyone who so much as breathed on her. Narcissa had severely underestimated what she had signed up for, especially given the fact that she was not pregnant with just any baby; she was pregnant with Draco, whom Hermione had no doubt was going to be as whiny in the womb as he would be out of it.

But she did not tell Narcissa any of this. Instead, as the two of them shared tea in the lady's parlour, she ate a large slice of treacle tart off a plate that rested on her belly and listened to Narcissa talk about how the Parkinsons had not used the right flowers for the small gathering they had held the day prior, in honour of Pansy's birth, and how she was going to do it so much better when her time came because "Aurelia Parkinson can pretend all she wants but she will never gain the level of equanimity required to properly host a social function after having been born an Avery."

Upon learning Pansy's mother, Aurelia, was the daughter of Elias Avery and the older sister of Gaspar Avery, Hermione was forced to concede that she was, in fact, very unlikely to possess what Narcissa deemed the appropriate level of equanimity — or any equanimity at

all, for that matter. This, she did tell Narcissa, who paused to laugh lightly before launching into a second and equally passionate tirade about Aurelia having failed to "give birth the right way." It reminded Hermione, just slightly, of Petunia Evans, now Dursley, and she doubted there was a single person alive who would appreciate that comparison.

She waited until Narcissa stopped herself to apologise for being "inappropriately excitable" before asking, with a frown, "There's a right way to give birth?"

Narcissa appeared aghast, her cup of tea pausing halfway to her mouth, the saucer held carefully beneath it in her other hand.

"But of course!" she exclaimed, immediately setting her tea back down on the coffee table. "There's a right way of doing everything, Mione, and that includes bringing one's child into the world. Has Tavaris not spoken to you about this yet?"

Suddenly apprehensive, Hermione shook her head slowly. She put down her plate.

"Well, then," said Narcissa, now looking deeply serious, "I suppose I shall have to tell you myself." She straightened her spine (Hermione hadn't realised it could be straighter than it already was) and raised her chin, folding her hands neatly in her lap. "Firstly, the birth must always take place at home — no exceptions."

As it turned out, this was precisely the truth; when Hermione went into labour the following week, she was not even offered the option of going to St Mungo's and was instead swiftly ushered into her bedroom by Dinky while Goppy Apparated himself half to death in his rush to notify all of those as to whom Tavaris referred, "the necessary participants."

"Everyone present is required to take an oath to prevent any thievery before they may be permitted into the birthing chamber. Umbilical cords are a key component in certain rituals, you know."

No one had even entered her bedroom yet when Hermione began screaming, for they were all still out in the hall, swearing Unbreakable Vows to Tavaris with Edmund acting as their bonder. Many a death threat were shouted at the closed door, as well as very loud and heavily detailed descriptions of how she planned to maim every single one of them if someone did not come help her within the next ten seconds.

"And it is a women-only event, too. In addition to the Healers and midwives, one's closest female companions are traditionally invited to join the expecting mother in the birthing chamber so that they may provide her with moral support, or perhaps offer a hand to hold in solidarity."

This female companion wound up being Narcissa herself, as well as Evangeline Malfoy and Desdemona Lestrange. They did not make for a very competent emotional support team. Healer Gibbon was no help in that regard, either, particularly due to her special brand of discouragingly encouraging comments, which included but did not end with, "Breath, Lady Nott, this is what you were born to do," "Just remember that the pain you are feeling right now is for the good of your house," and, "Think of how pleased your husband will be when

you give him his heir!" Hermione might have screamed at her once or twice, but there was no disparity in it, because she also screamed at everyone else — even Abraxas.

"No man may be permitted to enter until the birth is over — not even the baby's father — however, there must be a government official present to witness the birth in order to confirm the baby's legitimacy."

Especially Abraxas. As a matter of fact, Hermione's screams were not the only thing he had thrown at him; there were several pillows, too, and also a small clock. If Tavaris attempted to punish her for leaving his friend with a blackened eye, she would simply tell him that it was his own fault for (this was no time for censoring one's language) failing to keep his middle-aged cock to himself. That someone had to be present to confirm her son's legitimacy in the first place was utterly absurd, since she had not taken one step off the property in over a year, but that she should have a say in the matter was apparently, yet unsurprisingly, unthinkable.

"Finally, when the baby has been born, the witness must be given the opportunity to look him or her over; only once he has confirmed the legitimacy may the mother be handed her baby."

This time, she did not scream at Abraxas, for fear of frightening the tiny, crying infant in his arms; however, she did quietly inform him that if he did not hand Theodore over that instant, he would not live long enough to meet his grandson — and at that moment, for all that Hermione was determined to avoid altering the timeline, she meant it.

"The witness will then inform the baby's father, who will at last be given leave to rejoin his wife."

The door opened just as Dinky and Goppy finished changing the sheets on Hermione's bed and Healer Gibbon declared her fully healed. Evangeline, Desdemona, and Narcissa all slipped out, the latter looking terribly shaken, and Tavaris tentatively approached the four-poster. The midwife — whose name Hermione did not know, for she had only called her, "you useless troll," for the duration of the birth — had taken Theodore from Abraxas to wash him off. She was now disposing of the soiled towel that had initially been wrapped around him for the sake of Abraxas' sanity, and replacing it with a cream-coloured, knitted-lace shawl.

"Is that him?" Tavaris asked in a hushed voice, taking a careful seat on the bed beside Hermione. He propped his walking-stick up against the bedside table so gently that it made scarcely a sound at all; it would be a crime to disturb the silence that had washed over the room, the only noise welcomed into the resting peace of its stillness that of Theodore's cries.

"Yes, Lord Nott," the midwife said warmly, the corners of her lips rising into a small smile. "This is your heir. He's a little underweight, but otherwise completely healthy."

Slowly, she moved towards them, mindful of whom she was carrying. When she reached the bed, she began to lower Theodore for Tavaris to take —

"What do you think you're doing?" Hermione held her arms out expectantly, glaring at the midwife with a ferocity that she hoped conveyed the message that her life would be on the line if she dared to place Theodore in Tavaris' arms before her own. "That is *my* baby."

The midwife glanced nervously from Hermione to Tavaris; once the latter had nodded his head in approval, she leaned across him to place Theodore in Hermione's waiting arms.

Holding her breath, Hermione carefully drew back the hem of the shawl for a better view; within it laid one of the most fragile-looking infants she had ever seen. He had a tuft of fine, dark hair that rested damply on the top of his head, a small mouth with pink lips that wobbled as he gave slowly gentling cries, almost astoundingly soft skin that was flushed a warm rose, and a tiny button-nose, so like Hugo's when he had been born, so like Hermione's before him, and William Granger's before her.

"*Oh*," she breathed. Her eyes suddenly welled up with tears that promptly spilled over to slide down her nose and cheeks, leaving a salty wetness on her lips, which were parted slightly in awe. "*Oh*, *Theodore* …"

No sooner than she had spoken did Theodore open his eyes for the very first time, blinking as attempted to meet her gaze; they were a deep shade of blue, reminiscent of the bottom of the ocean, but the colour grew steadily lighter as it reached the thin circle lining his pupils, as though that was where the sunlight hit the surface of the water. These eyes belonged to Tavaris, but that detail was of no importance to Hermione because —

"*Oh, my love … my Theodore … oh, my Theodore …*"

A great warmth bloomed at the centre of her chest, and spread throughout the rest of her body, consuming her whole. The expanding of her heart was nearly painful as its walls were pushed forcibly outwards to make more room, bringing an ache that pressed against her lungs with every breath she took.

"He's beautiful," Hermione whispered. Letting out a soft, joyful laugh, she raised her hand to run the tip of her finger down the bridge of Theodore's nose, seized by a wonder that outshone all of that which had preceded it. "Look at him, Tavaris, isn't he beautiful?"

A long arm fit its way behind her to wrap itself round her shoulders. Tavaris' head lowered to hover a breath away from her own, his face turned down to watch the path of her finger as she next drew it along the tops of Theodore's cheekbones.

"He's perfect, darling," said Tavaris, his voice no less soft than her own. He, too, laughed, placing his free hand under her folded arms to help keep Theodore balanced. "Those are my eyes … he's got his father's eyes …"

"And his grandfather's nose." Sniffling, Hermione blinked quickly to clear her vision, unwilling to miss even a second of the sight before her. "My father — the photographs I've seen of him from when he was a baby — *they looked just like this*."

"Are those —?" Tavaris bent further for a closer look. "He's got freckles, right there on his nose, just like you. Do you see them?"

He was right; dusted across Theodore's nose, so light that she could hardly spot them at all, was a small smattering of freckles.

“He’s so — he’s so precious, I —” She laughed again, a watery sound, for she was weeping in earnest now. “My Theodore, my Theodore, my Theodore … my sweet, sweet boy … Your mother loves you s—so very much —” A sob escaped her lips, even as she beamed brighter than she had in all the time she had spent in the seventies.

A knock sounded from the door, but she did not tear her eyes from Theodore to look up. Tavaris beckoned whoever was on the other side to come in, and the congratulatory voices that shortly filled the near silence of the room were like a symphony in their softness.

“That him?” she heard Edmund ask, which was such a ridiculous question that he did not wait for an answer before adding, “congratulations, Tavaris, well done.”

“Where’s my, ‘well done?’” asked Abraxas, although he did not sound at all offended. “I’m the one who bravely withstood a clock to the face.”

“Not now, Abraxas,” admonished Evangeline. “This moment isn’t about you *or* your black eye.”

Their footsteps carried over to the bed, which they surrounded as if they were filling the gallery of a vast stadium. Abraxas stopped nearest to Hermione and Tavaris so that he could place the tome that held the history of the Nott family on the latter’s lap, along with what must have been a Self-Inking Quill, because he provided no ink.

“Oh, Lucius, would you look at him!” Narcissa whispered in amazement. “Will ours be that small, too, do you think?”

“Would you like a picture, Tavaris?” asked Edmund. “Something to capture the moment?”

Desdemona scoffed.

“You cannot possibly suggest that while she’s in this state. She’s just about *drenched* in sweat. No one appreciates a sweaty photograph, Edmund.”

“I don’t care,” said Hermione, without looking up. Beside her, Tavaris had retracted his hand from her folded arms to open the tome to the page on which the family tree came to an end; she felt him nod in agreement. “Please, Edmund, take one. I want to remember this.”

There was a shuffling of feet, and she guessed that everyone was making room for Edmund at the foot of the bed. Tavaris gave her shoulder a squeeze, pressing a kiss to her sweaty hair that she really could not have cared less about right then. There was a sharp *click*, followed by a bright flash that would have nearly blinded her had she been looking at the camera.

“Godparents, now?”

“God—? Oh, yes. Abraxas — Evangeline —”

This had Hermione raising her head. Her glare was weaker than she would have liked it to be since she had Theodore in her arms; in truth, it might have been more of a pout.

“Who are you to decide Theodore’s godparents without consulting me?” Tavaris opened his mouth, but before he could answer, she added indignantly, “*I’m* the one who pushed him out, thank you very much.”

“There’s no better choice, Mione. Abraxas has been my closest friend since the both of us were in nappies.”

“You hate Abraxas.”

“Exactly. He’s perfect for the role.”

“*Well*,” Hermione started, rather haughtily, but she had to pause for a second to think, because she did not actually want any of the people currently present to be her son’s godparents.

“See?” said Tavaris. “No one better.”

“It should be Narcissa and Lucius,” she decided abruptly, and she nodded to herself, pleased. “Yes, they’re the wiser choice. Really, Tavaris, which of them do you suspect is more likely to live long enough to actually care for Theodore if we were to die — Abraxas and Evangeline, or Lucius and Narcissa?”

He tilted his head as though considering this.

“Your kind words never fail to warm my heart, Lady Nott,” said Abraxas.

“Good. It could do with some of that.”

Tavaris snorted, then sighed, shaking his head ruefully.

“All right. Have it your way, then, darling.”

“Those words sound unnatural when spoken in your voice.”

“Someone’s feeling awfully feisty today,” Edmund remarked.

“Just get on with it, would you, Edmund?” said Tavaris. He gestured for Narcissa and Lucius to come stand at his side. “We haven’t got all night, you know.”

While Narcissa and Lucius made their way round the bed, Hermione frowned, bemused.

“Night?” she said. “Is it really that late?”

“You would know if you hadn’t thrown your clock at me.”

“It’s hardly my fault you didn’t duck in time, Abraxas.”

Another small cry came from Theodore, and Hermione quickly looked back down, every drop of irritation bleeding out of her. Cooing softly, she went back to tracing the lines of his face; he soon calmed, his eyelids beginning to droop. She lifted him further up onto her chest

so that she could lay a kiss on his forehead, and that was when Edmund snapped the next photograph.

A second round of murmured congratulations echoed from mouth to mouth. Tavaris picked up the quill once more, poising it above the first blank space within the pages of the tome. Hermione watched as, just beneath her name, he carefully added another.

Theodore Tavaris William Nott, son of Tavaris

November 5, 1979 —

*

Hermione got very little sleep over the course of the following week. Although this was typical in the case of new mothers, it was entirely her own fault this time.

"I said, '*No*,' did you somehow fail to hear me? Do I need to say it again? *No*."

"But, Mistress, it is being Dinky's *job* to mind babies!"

"Does it look like I care? *Give me my baby*, I'll not be telling you again!"

"But —!"

"Dinky! Give me my baby! *Now*!"

Muttering disgruntledly under their breath, Dinky backed away from the bassinet to reluctantly hand Theodore over.

"He'll be spending the night in *my* room, do you understand?" Hermione said sharply, holding Theodore close to her chest as he slept on, blissfully unaware of the whispered shouting match that had just taken place. "He's a newborn; he's not old enough to sleep on his own yet."

"That is why Dinky stays up all night keeping eyes on him," Dinky whispered heatedly, their little hands balled up into fists at their sides, "even when Dinky is being so tired that Dinky falls over!"

She spluttered. "That — that's not a good thing, Dinky! You need sleep the same as we do."

They rolled their eyes.

"Now you is just being silly."

Hermione stared at them, her mouth moving soundlessly. They continued to look at her as if she had lost all reason, and she eventually gave up, turning on the spot. She went through the

ensuite bathroom that connected the nursery to her bedroom, glancing down at Theodore every other second to ensure he remained undisturbed. With the utmost care, she placed him in the centre of her unmade bed, then went about building a wall of pillows to protect him from rolling off the edge of the mattress — regardless of the fact that he did not yet have the ability to roll at all — before slipping under the duvet herself, turning onto her side to let her body serve as the opposite wall.

Crookshanks leapt onto the bed to curl between the wall of pillows and the sleeping Theodore, helpfully serving as some added protection.

Unlike the nursery, Hermione's bedroom did not have any windows, so there was no moonlight gliding in to fall gently across Theodore's face, casting a cool, dream-like glow upon his skin. The flickering candles on each of her bedside tables, however, provided enough light for her to watch every flicker of movement behind his closed eyelids, every twitch of his nose, and every rise and fall of his chest, holding her own breath each time it rose, and only letting it out once she saw that he had as well.

This was a habit of Hermione's which had developed shortly after Rose had been born, and it had never gone away. The fear that drove it was, at times, a little irrational, but the impulse was and had always been inexorable; falling asleep was an impossibility if she did not first confirm that her children were still breathing. All those times in which she had hovered at the threshold of Rose's and Hugo's bedrooms long after she had tucked them in for the night, she had stared unwaveringly at their forms beneath the blankets, unable to look away until she had seen them rise and fall with a steadiness that could only be prompted by a deep, restful sleep.

The nightmares that Hermione had once experienced on a seemingly unending loop — the nightmares of being on the wrong end of Dolohov's wand, of the insurmountable pain that had kept her writhing on the Malfoys' drawing-room floor, and of Fenrir Greyback leering at her as he had awaited the permission to eat her alive in more ways than one — had changed so abruptly after Rose's birth that it had been almost jarring, and in their absence had come nightmares of those same monsters creeping into her home under the cover of darkness, intending to force those same fates originally intended for herself upon Rose and Hugo instead.

The urge to reassure herself was stronger with Theodore, and for good reason; now, the monsters were already inside. They need not creep, either, mindful to keep their voices low and their footsteps muffled, for they had been welcomed at the doors. How was she meant to ward them off when they had been invited, and she was without a wand? How was she meant to keep him from harm when one of them slept soundly directly above them?

Hermione ran her fingertip down the bridge of Theodore's nose, mesmerised by the familiar shape of it. He was so small — so fragile. It crushed her, her face twisting with a sense of guilt so overwhelming that it was downright painful, to remember these monsters would never hurt him as badly as she had; they would not be the ones responsible for sentencing him to four years in the cold isolation of a Dementor-filled prison. She was no better than Barty Crouch Sr in that regard, to have sent her own son to Azkaban without a second thought.

Heartless.

In a low, trembling hum, she began to sing.

"*Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens*

Bright copper kettles and warm woollen mittens

Brown paper packages tied up with strings

These are a few of my favourite things…"

By the time she, too, had nodded off, the fitted sheet beneath her head had grown damp with tears.

If Tavaris considered Hermione's current sleeping arrangement peculiar, he did not comment on it. When she woke the following morning to find him sitting at the foot of her four-poster, his gaze locked on Theodore (and Crookshanks' locked on him), she could tell at once that he did not understand why she would not simply allow Dinky to look after him. He maintained his silence, though, even as the week wore on and the bags under her eyes darkened bit by bit, left there from being woken by Theodore's cries several times a night.

Tavaris grew softer as well, gentler, and it made her wary. Each time he took Theodore into his arms, she held her breath, fearful of what he might do, but Tavaris never treated him any less carefully than she did.

It was a strange thing to behold, this softness. The image it created was akin to the photographs that conspiracists claimed were proof of extra-terrestrial life.

He was softer towards Hermione, too, in those first few weeks. She wondered if he had deluded himself into believing Theodore's presence made them a real family. Perhaps he was just taking advantage of her lack of fight, though, because when she had Theodore with her, it was easy to ignore the arm that he wrapped round her shoulders and the kisses that he placed on her temples.

She knew that this softness would not last, and she had no doubt that Tavaris knew it, too, for they had come to know each other far too well; he knew there would soon come a time when she stopped being complacent again, just as she knew he would no longer be so affectionate when she did.

Alas, that time had yet to come. Her temper did not rise easily when she had Theodore with her — unless another Death Eater tried to hold him, that was.

She never did get that clock replaced.

On November the twelfth, an announcement of Theodore's birth had been printed in the Society Section of *The Daily Prophet*, alongside a photographed portrait of him, Hermione, and Tavaris that had once more been taken by Edmund. In it, they gave the appearance of a relatively happy family, and the reason for this was simple: Hermione's eyes had been on Theodore. That the writer of the announcement had neglected to state either Tavaris' age or

her own did not go unnoticed, but what really got to her was the realisation that it would be seen and read by people besides those who had already known of her pregnancy — people like those whom she still tried and failed to avoid wondering about. Would those people believe the happy image, or would they know it was a lie?

Would she ever stop asking questions that she did not want the answers to?

The rest of the month was spent largely with Narcissa, who had happily accepted the task of assisting Hermione in planning a celebration in honour of Theodore's birth, most likely because it would serve as practice for the one that she would later throw in honour of Draco. Apparently, holding a celebration of this sort was traditional amongst pure-blood houses such as the one Hermione unfortunately belonged to. It was simultaneously not too different and completely unlike the infrequently hosted post-birth baby showers of the Muggle world. It was also not entirely about Theodore; it was about the new heir of House Nott.

The long table within the formal dining room had swiftly transformed into a workstation full of *Witch Weekly* magazines, colour swatches, flower choices, lists of potential party themes and forms of entertainment, calendars, possible menus and invitation styles, and colour-coded drafts that Hermione vaguely appreciated. It was organised chaos.

"Now," Narcissa said, opening the new journal she had purchased specifically for this occasion to the first page, on which was a hand-written compilation of names, "Tavaris has already taken the time to create the guest list for us, so once we've decided upon our desired theme, we can select a style of invitation and owl one to each of the households on this list. It's extremely important to get that step out of the way as soon as possible, otherwise the invitees may make other plans, and therefore be unable to attend."

Apprehensive, Hermione leaned forwards to peer at the guest list, and Narcissa slid the journal closer. As her eyes travelled down the page, flitting from name to name, Hermione's apprehension only grew, reaching tenfold of what it had been previously when she found herself having to turn to the next page, on which the list continued.

There were ninety-one guests in total, as was written and fiercely circled with black ink at the bottom of the second page. Going through the list again, she discovered that twenty-eight out of the ninety-one had a small star scribbled next to their name; it did not take long for her to realise these were the names of the Death Eaters who would be in attendance. Once more, she flipped back to the first page, trailing her finger down the many rows as she read, this time counting the surnames.

Present at the celebration of her son's birth would be twelve Notts, four Malfoys, five Lestranges, nine Blacks, three Averys, two Mulcibers, four Yaxleys, four Selwyns, five Traverses, four Rosiers, five Greengrasses, three Bulstrodes, five Rowles, six Parkinsons, three Macmillans, three Crouches, two Goyles, two Crabbes, six Carrows, three Flints, and one Dark Lord. Barring the latter, not one family on the list had not been named members of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. This fact did not surprise Hermione. What did surprise her was —

"How exactly does Tavaris expect the Head of Magical Law Enforcement to attend the same party as the Dark Lord, and fail to realise it?"

“The Dark Lord won’t be arriving until later on, of course,” Narcissa told her, as though this should have been obvious. “Only the households which have a star next to the name of one of their members will be invited to remain for the evening portion of the event — with the exception of the Crouches, since Barty’s parents remain unaware of precisely whom their son has pledged his allegiance to. And besides, Bartemius Sr won’t likely be accepting the invitation; I’ve heard he hardly ever leaves the Ministry these days. It shall be Barty and his mother who come as representatives of their family. It is a shame Barty won’t be able to stay the evening, though. I suspect he will be quite upset about that.”

Supressing a sigh, Hermione propped one elbow up on the table, to Narcissa’s obvious disapproval, so that she could comfortably rub her temple; she could feel a headache coming on. Having only slept for roughly four or five hours each night that past week was of no help in the matter.

“And these titles,” she said, pointing to the name, *Lady Morgan Travers née van Leeuwen*, “are how each guest ought to be addressed, is that correct?”

Narcissa nodded.

“Yes, Tavaris added them for your benefit, seeing as you have yet to learn the histories of these families. See here — the Greengrasses —” she tapped the section of the list devoted to the five Greengrasses, “— their ancestors, like my own, were nobility — lords and ladies of the wizarding world — and as such, they must be addressed by their proper titles. There’s the Head of House, Lord Nathaniel, and his wife, Lady Eileen, who, on an occasion of this kind, must be addressed as, ‘Lord and Lady Greengrass.’ Their first-born son, Errett, must consequently be called, ‘Heir Greengrass,’ and his sister, ‘Miss Greengrass,’ or else simply, ‘Miss Bedelia,’ as she’s not yet married. She shall be Lady Black, though, soon enough; she and Regulus recently became betrothed, isn’t it wonderful?”

She smiled, looking incredibly pleased about this. Hermione, on the other hand, felt rather poorly for the girl; she knew that Bedelia Greengrass would never be given the chance to become Bedelia Black.

“Bedelia is an absolute darling, truly,” Narcissa told her. “But as I was saying, since Errett’s wife, Cecillia, *is* married, she is to be addressed as, ‘Madam Greengrass.’ If the Greengrasses were to have a second son, he would be addressed as, ‘Master.’

“You may only address someone by their given name, and without their title, if they’ve given you the leave to do so. However, for these occasions, using their title remains necessary. That said, using their title *and* their given name is often necessary regardless — like in the case of my mother, for there are currently four Madam Blacks. You must therefore address her as, ‘Madam Druella,’ if there is another Madam Black present in the same room. Once the Dark Lord arrives, though, titles mustn’t be used for anyone but himself.”

If Hermione had thought her headache could not have gotten any worse, she would have been wrong. This time, she was unable to hold back her sigh. Most of the guests on the list were near-strangers to her, in both this time and the next, just a few of their names recognisable as future members of the Wizengamot with whom she had shared many an argument. The pair whom she knew best were four-year-old Marcus Flint and not yet one-month-old Pansy

Parkinson, and she was unsure how she felt about that. Marcus Flint had never made any attempt to hide his opinion on her blood status whilst they were in school, and nor had Pansy Parkinson, who, when Hermione met her for the second time around, it would be with the knowledge that she would one day be her daughter-in-law — another thing she had yet to decide her feelings on.

Despite her increasing apprehensiveness over the matter, there was more than one person on the guest list that Hermione was actually rather interested in becoming acquainted with: Ernie Macmillan's parents and his older sister, Pippa; Winifred Crouch, the mother of Barty Jr who loved him so much that in two years' time she would make it her dying wish to take his place in Azkaban; and the wife of Death Eater Corban Yaxley, Loretta Yaxley née Abbott, whom she knew must be related to Pandora and Hannah Abbott.

"There are a few things you ought to know about each family prior to the event," Narcissa went on, very pointedly shooting a look at Hermione's elbow before resting her forearms against the edge of the table. "We shall start with the Crouches. Bartemius Sr has two sisters, the youngest of whom, Honoria, is married to Oswald Macmillan. The other sister, Callidora, you'll see has been excluded from this list on account of her marriage to Amos Diggory —"

Hermione jolted, her elbow sliding straight off the table with a force that had her wrist smacking painfully against the edge —

"— who is a known blood traitor. They have a son now — Cedric, I believe his name is. The Diggorys remain firmly included within the Crouch family, you understand, but they are certainly not the sort to be worthy of an invitation to an event hosted by House Nott."

"I — hang on — Amos — Amos Diggory is —" Hermione floundered, her shock causing her brain to feel as though it had been momentarily emptied of its contents. "Do you mean to tell me that Cedric Diggory and Er— Pippa Macmillan are the first cousins of Barty Crouch Jr?"

Narcissa looked at her in bemusement.

"*Yes* …" she said slowly. Raising one thinly-arched eyebrow, she added, "Would you like me to go over it again or may I move on?"

There seemed to be something lodged in Hermione's throat, preventing her from speaking. A memory formed at the forefront of her mind, of something Rabastan had once said that she had failed to properly register.

"One of Barty's aunts — the one who married Amos Diggory — gave birth to a son last summer — that right, Regulus? Anyway, our Head of Magical Law Enforcement held him for about two seconds before the baby sicked up all over him. None too pleased with Crouch's politics, I'd wager."

Realising that Narcissa was waiting for a response, Hermione nodded and gestured jerkily for her to proceed.

"Honoria's husband, Oswald, is the nephew of my great-aunt, Lady Melania, but their relationship has been rather tense ever since Oswald's older sister, Victoria, allowed her son

to attend one of those *un-verse-eet-ees* they have in the Muggle world. He wished to study *Muggle architecture* of all things — can you believe it? Great-Aunt Melania has since cut ties with Victoria, but Oswald refuses to do the same —"

Draco Malfoy and Ernie Macmillan are cousins, Hermione thought dazedly, *and Barty didn't bat an eye at his own cousin being murdered in the Triwizard Tournament —*

"— and he still lets his daughter near her McKinnon cousins, regardless of their newly-acquired blood-traitor status — oh, pardon me, Victoria is married to Leon McKinnon. They've three children: Walter, Stefan, and Marlene. Although I suppose you might already know that, mightn't you?"

Marlene — Ernie, Draco, Cedric, and Barty are all cousins of Marlene. Barty pledged his allegiance to someone who murdered two of his cousins.

"The Traverses have done far better at separating themselves from the McKinnons," Narcissa carried on, now flipping back to the first page of the journal to point out the names of the four Traverses. "The eldest son of Leon and Victoria, Walter, is married to Aisling Travers, who is Eamon's twin sister —"

Like a globe on its axis, Hermione's head spun. The name, *Heir Eamon Travers*, had a star beside it; he would be the only one out of the five Death Eaters responsible for the murder of the McKinnon family to ever be caught.

Narcissa's voice suddenly sounded very far away.

"— Walter and Aisling have a son now, did you know? Really? Well, I can't quite recall what they named him, but I believe he turned two this year —"

No more than two years were left before there would no longer be any McKinnons left in the wizarding world; Eamon Travers had helped murder his twin sister and her four-year-old son.

"— Bella suspects they've all joined Dumbledore's Order, but Lucius told me he's not heard of anyone but the daughter doing such a thing. Most blood traitors are too cowardly, you see —"

The heinous acts committed in both this war and the next had been so much more personal than Hermione had ever realised. These wars had not simply been fought between witches and wizards with differing beliefs: it had been family against family; cousin against cousin and brother against sister.

Sirius was killed by his cousin, her brain supplied, unhelpfully helpful, *and Tonks by her aunt.*

"— although Eamon and Aisling's mother did try to argue the decision. It does not seem to matter to her that Aisling married a wizard so *unworthy* because … well … because she's still her daughter, I suppose." Distantly, Hermione heard Narcissa swallow, then clear her throat before carrying on at an uncharacteristic speed. "But, of course, Lady Morgan knew better

than to truly go against her husband so she stays quiet on the matter now, as any good wife would do, it is their duty, after all, *our* duty, and —"

The strain on her voice had Hermione finally tearing herself from her thoughts. She looked up at Narcissa, nonplussed, and feeling as though she shouldn't be. Even in 2020, Narcissa had still not reconnected with her sister Andromeda, despite the latter having made the acquaintance of both Draco and Scorpius.

"Forgive me, Mione," Narcissa said, softly and a little breathlessly. A pink tinge had appeared high upon her cheeks, as if she were embarrassed about allowing herself to become flustered, and Hermione realised this was what she was asking forgiveness for; apologising for her emotions seemed to be a habit of Narcissa's. "I got a little away from myself for a moment there."

Hermione did not reply for several seconds, eyeing the rare cracks in Narcissa's expression: her abnormally bright eyes, the slight wavering of her smile, and the rosiness of her usually pale cheeks that had yet to fade.

"There's nothing to forgive, Narcissa," said Hermione at last, giving Narcissa a smile that she hoped was more gentle than sad. She glanced at their half-empty teacups on the table, their contents undoubtedly cold. "Shall we ask Dinky for a fresh pot of tea before we continue? Perhaps some food to nibble on? I'd also like to check on Theodore."

The relief on Narcissa's face was evident for little more than a second before she regained her composure.

"That would be lovely, thank you," she said graciously. She returned her gaze to the journal, pursing her lips slightly in consideration. "I think we shall cover the Parkinsons next. Madam Aurelia, I've told you before, was born an Avery, and one must always be warned before meeting an Avery. The mouths on them, *really*, so uncouth …"

The remainder of the afternoon was spent learning of the many skeletons that resided in the closets of the so-called Sacred Twenty-Eight. It was not until the hour hand on the grandfather clock in the corner of the room arrived at the *V* that Narcissa reached the Abbott family — or, rather, the only member of it to have been placed on the guest list.

"Loretta no longer maintains a close relationship with her family, not since her marriage to Corban. Her older brother, Conrad, is heir to their house, and he has made some … questionable decisions as of late." Narcissa's expression turned grim, and she added in explanation, "He married a Muggle-born."

Hannah's mother, Hermione thought sadly. This conclusion made the most sense, considering the Abbotts were indeed listed in the *Pure-Blood Directory*, but Hannah's mother would be killed by Death Eaters in 1996; she had not been a pure-blood.

"Do you know her name?" Hermione asked, glancing down at Theodore. He was resting in her arms, his head against her chest, and although his eyes fluttered open every now and then, he had remained blissfully calm.

“Alice?” said Narcissa uncertainly. “No, that’s not right. It does begin with an ‘A,’ though.”

Hermione listened to Narcissa drum her fingers lightly upon the surface of the table as she thought, but her eyes remained on Theodore. She recalled the day, only two weeks into their sixth year of school, that Hannah had been taken out of Herbology to be informed that her mother was dead. They had not seen Hannah for a long time after that.

“It was the Death Eaters,” Ernie had told Hermione in a whisper, stood together in the Reference Section of the Hogwarts library. “They broke in on Wednesday, the Aurors think. Mr Abbott was away for a conference, so Mrs Abbott’s body wasn’t found until yesterday morning when he got back. I think they were — Hermione, I think they were attempting to *cleanse* Hannah’s bloodline. Can you imagine what would’ve happened if Hannah had been there, too?”

“Alyssa,” Narcissa said finally, sounding confident. “Yes, Alyssa. She was in Hufflepuff with Conrad. Loretta told me that he gave her their grandmother’s wedding ring at their graduation ceremony. I wasn’t witness, they were both a few years ahead of me, the same as Bella, but when Conrad started to get down on one knee, Loretta tried to force him back on his feet, only he shook her off.”

“How did the rest of their family react to their engagement?” asked Hermione curiously.

“Oh, they weren’t pleased, that much is certain. But ultimately, they did allow it. Some of them even turned against Loretta for her attempts to reason with her brother; their cousin, Pandora, was Conrad’s staunchest supporter. Child or not, Loretta says their cousin has always had a mind of her own. Pandora gave Alyssa her own locket as an engagement present; one of the oldest Abbott family heirlooms, and it now decorates the neck of a Muggle-born.”

Narcissa’s disgust was clear. Had they been discussing anything else, Hermione suspected the irony might have amused her; after all, the ring that decorated her finger had most certainly been in the Nott family for generations, and her blood was not nearly as pure as everyone believed.

“Alyssa is pregnant now, I heard,” said Narcissa, with a pinched expression, as if there were an unruly stench in the air. “This time next year, the Abbott bloodline will have officially been sullied.”

Hermione’s chest tightened. She held Theodore closer, as though to shield him. With a soft sigh, Narcissa leaned in to join her in peering down at him. After a moment, she reached out to trace a circle gently upon the skin of his palm; his hand closed on her fingers, keeping them there.

Narcissa let out another sigh, just as soft as the first.

“Let us hope it is not a son.”

*

Hermione did not know how, nor did she think she ever would, but one day in early December, Tavaris expanded the Blood Wards holding her to the Nott Estate to cover his second property: Nottingham Hall. The upcoming celebration of Theodore's birth had too large a guest list to be held where they currently lived, especially since the following three weeks would be spent hosting the entirety of the Nott family.

According to Tavaris, the family was spread out across Europe, and had been for generations. The head of the family was expected to remain in Britain, never to stray too far from Hogwarts; it was their duty, as had been written by their ancestors, to await Salazar Slytherin's heir. The rest of the family, however, was free to travel wherever they pleased, and they did. Despite their loyalty to Slytherin, Hermione thought the Nott family had quite a few qualities that were more aligned with those attributed to Rowena Ravenclaw.

They travelled to learn.

In the last century, whilst Torsten Nott's line remained in Britain, Torsten's younger brother, Grindel III, had returned to Germany following his marriage to Diera Travers, and the birth of their son, Theomund IX, to investigate the magical plants of the Black Forest in Baden-Württemberg. Theomund resided there even now, alongside his wife, Tate — who also happened to be his first cousin (Hermione didn't want to think about that longer than she had to) — Tate's mother, Adalaide, their son, Terric, and Terric's wife and daughter, Harolyn and Gisela.

Wilfred's line, meanwhile, was divided between three countries: his daughter, Tate, in Germany; his son, Rawdon, in Greece; and Rawdon's own son in France. Rawdon had left for Assos following his graduation from Durmstrang Institute, in the hope of studying the various magical creatures native to Greece; there, he had met his wife, Aleena, with whom he had two children, Barnett and Odelyn. The latter had not yet left home, but the former had spent most of his twenties jumping from country to country, acquainting himself with their histories, before finally settling down in Champagne with his wife, Ivette. He and Ivette now lived there with their three-year-old son, Delany.

Obviously, there would not be enough room at the Nott Estate for all twelve of them.

Tavaris had once told Hermione that Nottingham Hall "put Malfoy Manor to shame," and on the day of their arrival, she was forced to admit that he had been telling the truth.

The building itself was roughly twice the size of Malfoy Manor, and it sat upon a vast hill overlooking the nearby settlements from one side, and the lake, Marina, from the other. It possessed a sturdy, square-like appearance, with walls of limestone, thick Doric friezes and double-arch windows, and hip and valley roofs adorned with metal spires and spiked finials. It towered over its snow-covered grounds, casting a great shadow upon the two curving cobblestone drives that led to its entrance, and the stone fountain that separated them.

Tavaris, Hermione, Theodore, and Crookshanks arrived there by means of a pocket-watch Portkey, and landed directly before the tall mahogany doors, on either side of which was a giant stone gargoyle. The gargoyles eyed them all suspiciously before resettling in their frozen states, likely having recognised them as welcomed parties, and as if to their bidding, the doors swung open.

Hermione rushed inside, clutching Theodore to her chest to protect him from the bitter winter air.

“They’re Enchanted, the gargoyles; they’ll attack anyone who tries to enter uninvited,” Tavaris said as he stepped in after her. “Assuming they managed to get past the wards, that is.”

They now stood in a small stone entryway. He gestured her through the archway opposite the doors, into a wide hall with panelled walls painted a silvery-blue and a parquet floor that had clearly been recently waxed. Suits of armour that may or may not have been made of solid gold lined a series of arches across from them, the most centre three of which opened to a small set of steps leading down to the floor of a massive two-story hall.

“The Great Hall,” Tavaris said, following Hermione’s gaze. “Named after the one at Hogwarts, of course, although this one isn’t used for dining. More so for entertaining, really.”

He shot her a smug look, and she realised that she had been gaping; she hastily shut her mouth, glaring at him.

“Where’s the room that's been made up for Theodore and I?” she asked. “I’ve no patience for a tour at the moment, especially if it’s anything like the last one you gave me, and I’d like to put him down for a nap.”

Theodore yawned, as though in agreement. From within the wicker basket Tavaris was carrying, Crookshanks whined for release. After setting the basket down and allowing him to wander off into the Hall, sniffing about curiously, Tavaris called, “Goppy!”

Within a second, a small *pop* echoed throughout the hall, and then Goppy was standing before them and sweeping into a low bow.

“Goppy is so glad to be having Master Tavaris at Nottingham Hall again,” he said in his usual hoarse voice. “Goppy prepares everything for his master’s arrival.”

“Yes, yes,” said Tavaris dismissively, as he shed his cloak. “Take our cloaks, would you? And then prepare a light lunch to be brought up to the morning room. *Light*, I tell you; we need to save room for dinner.”

“Of course, Master Tavaris.”

Hermione had to let Tavaris help her with her own cloak, struggling to remove it herself without jostling Theodore in the sling that secured him to her. Once Goppy had disappeared, they started down the hall, towards the left staircase.

“Down on the ground floor are both the formal and informal dining rooms,” Tavaris told her as they began their ascent, “the lounge, the parlour, the conservatory, and one thing you certainly won’t find at Malfoy Manor —” he smirked, “— a swimming pool.”

Hermione raised her eyebrows.

“Oh, yes. It was inspired by the Prefects’ bath at Hogwarts. Abraxas refuses to swim in it these days; a matter of pride, I think.”

“The rivalry between you two is absurd,” she said, shaking her head. “And you call yourselves best friends.” She scoffed. “Honestly, Tavaris, you’re both too old to be acting this childishly.”

This turned out to be the wrong thing to say. It was often difficult to tell what might upset Tavaris; sometimes, insolence merely amused him, but other times —

His hand dropped onto her shoulder, gripping it tightly. They reached the first floor, and Hermione had a single glimpse of a long hall identical to the one below it and a balcony that overlooked the Great Hall before she was steered up the next set of stairs.

“I suspect your parents were the sort to have taught you to make your voice heard … to never hesitate to speak up …” His nails dug into her collar, forcibly turning her up another flight. “But, Mione, you are old enough to have realised by now that people care much less about your opinion than you seem to think they do, and they would appreciate your presence a great deal more if you refrained from sharing it.”

It was almost a surprise how spot on he was.

Hermione was quiet, biting the inside of her cheek as her eyes began to sting. She refused to let him reduce her to tears, as that remark surely would have done to her younger self.

At last, they seemed to have reached the top floor. Tavaris directed her through a set of doors and into a small parlour which had grey carpeting with swirling patterns of golden thread, and camel-brown wallpaper with further patterned gold and matching crowning. There was a seating area to the right with brown leather sofas, chairs with richly-coloured upholstery, and mahogany side tables, on which sat gold-trimmed vases of red roses. Directly before them was a narrow staircase, and to the left was a wide archway, through which the carpet continued.

“These are the family apartments,” he informed her, without removing his hand from her person. “They take up nearly the entire north-western corner of Nottingham Hall. This here is the parlour, and to your left we have the morning room — meals are most often taken there, in the absence of guests. There are two bedrooms and two bathrooms on this floor. Now, upstairs …”

Hermione attempted to shake him off gently, without disturbing Theodore, but he only tightened his grasp, making her wince, and ushered her upstairs.

“... we have another bedroom, the master, the nursery, and the drawing room.”

They turned right, into the drawing room; it was decorated the same as the parlour below, with the added presence of an ornate fireplace. Two large portraits with gilded frames hung parallel to each other on either side of another set of doors: one was of Cantankerus, who managed to nod at them without lowering his chin from its haughtily raised position, and the

other portrait was of an equally haughty-looking witch with blonde hair pinned up with a jewelled tiara. She raised one thinly-arched eyebrow.

“It is high time you visited me, Tavaris,” she said coldly. “I had almost begun to believe you had forgotten all about me.”

Tavaris let out a breath that was almost a sigh.

“Mione, meet my mother,” he said: “Udela.”

Udela Nott transferred her gaze to Hermione, her eyebrow still halfway up her forehead as she sized her up. After a moment, she shook her head, seemingly to herself.

“How old are you, my dear?”

Hermione thought quickly. “Twenty.”

Udela shook her head again.

“Udela, don’t start,” said Cantankerus wearily.

She ignored him, glaring at Tavaris.

“You should be ashamed of yourself, taking a wife less than half your age.”

“Udela —”

“Our son is practically a predator, Tank! No better than his grandfather, I say!”

“Don’t bring my father into this!” Cantankerus snapped.

Theodore whimpered in Hermione’s arms, and this was the only warning they had before he began to cry, startled by the raised voices. She shushed him softly, rubbing his back.

Tavaris hand tightened even further, but this time, Hermione doubted it was out of cruelty.

“I’ve read those journals the same as you have,” snarled Udela, crossing her arms over her chest, “and your father was a paedophile!”

Cantankerus opened his mouth, looking outraged —

With stiff shoulders, Tavaris led Hermione into the next room. Neither Cantankerus nor Udela seemed to notice, too busy arguing.

“She’s not wrong, you know,” Hermione said, bouncing Theodore a little as he continued to cry. “About Torsten.”

“Yes, well —” Tavaris clenched his jaw, finally releasing her now sore shoulder. “This is the master suite, where we’ll be staying for the duration of our time here.”

She cast a glance about the room, blinking, slightly stunned, at the grand, golden frame of the bed that took up the centre of the space; it was impossible to tell whether it had been painted or not. In front of an ottoman at the foot of the bed were two trunks: one black and one powder-blue. His words repeated themselves in her head, and she frowned.

"Hang on — where *we'll* be staying? As in, *together*?"

Tavaris nodded, striding forwards to open the black trunk. He drew his wand, and its contents began to fly across the room to a massive mahogany wardrobe, which opened as though of its own accord; trousers, shirts, robes, and cloaks began to hang themselves up, and shoes walked themselves onto the bottom ledge of the wooden rack on the floor of the wardrobe.

"I will not sleep in the same room as you." Hermione shook her head, not moving an inch. "Not a chance, Tavaris."

"The guest suites will be entirely filled by the rest of the family," said Tavaris, now sending a line of floating objects towards a pair of doors on the right; they opened like those of the wardrobe, admitting several stoppered vials, as well as a comb and a wooden toothbrush. "The two bedrooms downstairs will be taken by the Malfoys —"

Theodore cried louder still, drowning out whatever Tavaris said next. Hermione shushed him again, then turned him round in her arms as Tavaris opened the blue trunk, directing his gaze to the dresses, gowns, and robes that proceeded to dance into the wardrobe; each article of clothing moved as if worn by someone they could not see, who was waltzing to a song they could not hear. Theodore fell silent, his tears subsiding. He watched avidly as Tavaris Charmed one dress to perform a series of pirouettes.

"There's no need to put my things away," she said, careful to speak lightly. "You mentioned there's another bedroom on this floor. I'll take that one."

"Indeed. My own," said Tavaris, his voice equally light. He smiled at Theodore, drawing a pair of his own robes from the wardrobe to join the last dancing dress in a tango. "It's the heir's bedroom. Are you certain you would prefer to sleep in my childhood bed?"

"Look at them dancing, Theodore," Hermione cooed, pointing to the clothes with her free hand. "That's magic!" To Tavaris, she added, "It's better than sleeping in your current one."

"See that door over there —" Without taking his eyes off the Charmed clothes, Tavaris nodded to a door in the corner on her right, next to a vanity. "That is the entrance to the nursery, where Theodore shall be sleeping. You won't hear him crying in the night if you choose to sleep elsewhere, and I know how you like to soothe him yourself."

"He's been sleeping in my own bed, you know this."

Theodore's eyes grew wide with wonder. The robes lowered the dress into a dramatic dip.

"Not for naps, he is. And all his things will be in the nursery, anyway. You would have to pass through here each time he requires changing."

“I’ll not be sharing your bed, Tavaris,” said Hermione, her voice growing strained with the effort it took to keep from raising it. “I don’t care what you say, it’s not happening.”

Tavaris sighed, sending the clothes back into the wardrobe. He looked at her, his expression one of mocking disappointment.

“Fine,” he said heavily. “In that case, I give you permission to send an owl to the Dark Lord, requesting he sleep on a sofa.”

Hermione felt herself go pale.

“What?” she whispered.

“He stays in the heir’s bedroom from time to time, when he comes to visit the library, or the ritual grounds on the outskirts of the forest. He shall be sleeping there tomorrow night, after the party. But who knows — perhaps the Dark Lord would be willing to share.” Tavaris gave her a knowing look. “What’s mine is his, after all.”

Hermione swallowed past a sudden lump in her throat. She searched her mind for a solution, and when she came up with nothing, she turned on the spot and marched Theodore through the door without a backward glance.

The nursery was significantly brighter than what she had seen of the family apartments thus far, sunlight streaming in from windows which looked out across vast gardens, and past them, a wharf on a frozen lake. Yellow birds fluttered along the teal walls; a claw-footed bookcase stood furthest from the door, beside a painted toy chest and a stuffed Niffler half her size; on her right was a changing table and a chest of drawers, and on her left, a pale-yellow loveseat with white pillows and a knitted blanket; and in the centre of the room, on a circular, cream-coloured rug, was a bassinet.

It was beautiful.

She brought Theodore over to the changing table and laid him down to remove the layers upon layers of shawls she had put on him in preparation for the single minute he had spent outdoors — because apparently wizarding infants born to nobility did not wear proper clothes — then went about changing him, all the while entertaining him with a song.

“*Cream-coloured ponies and crisp apple strudels*

Doorbells and sleigh bells and schnitzel with noodles

Wild geese that fly with the moon on their wings

These are a few of my favourite things…”

To sleep with a Death Eater, or to sleep with the Dark Lord; what must Hermione have done to deserve a life in which she would be presented with a choice like that?

She decided the nursery loveseat would have to do.

The other members of the Nott family arrived by Portkey at approximately half-past six o'clock that evening. Hermione and Tavaris greeted them in the Great Hall, Theodore still dozing in the nursery under the watchful eyes of Dinky and Crookshanks, the latter of whom had finally put a stop to his exploration to stand guard for his new favourite being (Billy Stubbs was perhaps feeling a tad bit jealous).

As the other Notts flooded in, their voices bouncing off the two-story tall walls to echo throughout the Hall, Hermione and Tavaris rose from the sofa by the grand windows opposite the main entrance, the curtains of which were drawn apart to display the indigo night sky, speckled with twinkling stars.

The first person to reach them was a thin witch with a wizened face, dark eyes, and a silver bob of strict curls. She patted Tavaris' cheek with a scarce smile.

"You have gained wrinkles since I have last seen you," she said in a sharp, German accent. "You are becoming old now, like meself."

"It is good to see you, too, Aunt Adelaide," said Tavaris, and he glanced at Hermione. "Mione, this is my great-aunt, Adalaide."

Wilfred's wife, thought Hermione, offering her hand. *She had her first child at sixteen.* Recalling her lessons with Narcissa, she said, "How do you do, Madam Adalaide?"

"Ach, no." Adalaide Nott squeezed Hermione's hand in both of her own. "You call me Aunt Adalaide; I call you Mione."

"Very well," said Hermione. She smiled. "Aunt Adalaide."

"I will introduce you to my —" Aunt Adalaide paused and peered behind herself. She let go of Hermione's hand to wave her own impatiently. "Komm jetzt."

She seized another witch, who had brighter eyes and a short, brown bob that was not yet entirely grey.

"This is my daughter, Tate." Aunt Adalaide cast another glance over her shoulder, huffing when she realised, whilst half of the group was congregated around Tavaris, the other half was gazing curiously about the Hall. "Warum ignorieren alle das Mädchen? Sie ist nicht stumm. Rawdon!"

Rawdon Nott looked no younger than Tate, and Hermione remembered that they had been born months apart rather than years. He was stocky and broad-shouldered, and had a brown goatee flecked with grey. With him was a warm-skinned, middle-aged witch with shiny, dark hair that cascaded down to her waist.

"Rawdon Nott, my Lady," he said, bowing over Hermione's hand. She could not tell whether he was mocking her or not. When he straightened, he retook the arm of the witch at his side. "This is my wife, Aleena."

Aleena grasped Hermione's hand.

“Nice to meet you, my Lady,” she said, in a startlingly loud voice. Hermione might have thought her accent was Spanish had she not already known she was from Greece.

After that, Hermione was introduced to Rawdon and Aleena’s daughter, Odelyn, who was only about a handful of years older than Hermione presently was herself, and who looked very like her mother, and spoke just as loudly, too. Their son, Barnett, greeted her next, with a kiss on her hand and a murmured, “My Lady.” He was as tall as Tavaris, but had both darker hair and skin, as well as a pencil-thin moustache that stretched when he gave her a wide, leering grin. His wife, Ivette, gave Hermione a kiss on each cheek. She had beaming, sunshine hair, wore a set of pearls everywhere one could reasonably wear pearls, and had on deep red lipstick, traces of which Hermione dearly hoped had not been left on her face.

Ivette and Barnett’s three-year-old son, Delany, squirmed restlessly from where he was perched on his mother’s hip, and she dropped him into Hermione’s arms without warning, muttering rapidly about how he and “zee leettle lord” would grow to be great friends.

“Ah!” Ivette exclaimed suddenly, as Hermione shifted Delany onto her own hip. “I forget, Tavaris say your family come from France. Vous parlez Français, oui?”

Oh, dear.

“Oui,” Hermione said haltingly, “mais … je n'ai plus de pratique. Je n'ai pas parlé Français — erm — depuis des années.”

Ivette gave her a grim nod; apparently, Hermione’s French really was quite rusty. She brushed her son’s fawn-coloured bangs off his forehead.

“C'est votre cousin, mon ange,” she told him. “Lady Mione. You call, ‘m’Lady.’”

Delany peered up at Hermione.

“Salut, m’Lady!”

“Salut, Delany,” she replied. “Comment ça va?”

“Vraiment faim,” said Delany seriously.

“It’s a good thing dinner is ready, then,” said Hermione, smiling. She heaved Delany higher on her hip as he began to slip; he was significantly heavier than Theodore, and it was not as though she had gotten much exercise in recent years. “Nous allons manger … très bientôt.”

As Delany clapped his hands in excitement, she looked over to where Tavaris was conversing with a wizard who bore a great resemblance to him, although he appeared to be about twenty years older; it was not difficult to identify him as Theomund IX, as he was the oldest of the men present. Beside him was another wizard, who looked about the same age as Tavaris, and had features similar to both his and Theomund’s. Those features, however, were all slightly off, with an oversized jaw, a nose that seemed to droop at the tip, and rather lopsided ears; the evidence of the dangers of inbreeding led Hermione to conclude that he was the son of Theomund and Tate — Terric.

Slightly behind Terric stood two more witches, one older and one younger, and they had their heads bent together in whispered conversation. The older witch could only be Terric's wife, Harolyn, which meant the younger one was their daughter, Gisela, who was just one year older than Hermione's current age, and unnaturally pale.

"Tavaris," Hermione called, seizing his attention. When Tavaris turned away from Theomund and Terric, she added, nodding to Delany, "Our guests are hungry."

Tavaris glanced away to an archway on the right side of the Hall, through which the formal dining room could be glimpsed; the table was set for fourteen, and as they watched, the first course appeared on each sterling plate.

"It's a good thing dinner is ready, then," he said.

Chapter End Notes

THEO! I researched birth traditions in the royal family for this, lol.

That checking to see if her children are still breathing thing that Hermione does? I got that from my mum; she crept into my sister's, my sibling's, and I's rooms every night to make certain we hadn't spontaneously stopped breathing. I think she did it until we were all well past ten years old.

I swear, in creating that godforsaken guest list, I nearly drew the family trees of half the Sacred Twenty-Eight. Those ninety-one guests? I've got a backstory for just about all of them. Such a smart thing for one to spend their time on amidst exam season, don't you think? Barty Crouch Sr, in cannon, has two unnamed sisters; so there they are, named. Who ever said the Blacks were the only ones with extensive family issues?

Next up: an alarming amount of pure-bloods pretending they all like each other.

W.F.

Chapter Summary

I am the righteous hand of God
And I am the devil that you forgot
And I told you one day you will see that I'll be back, I guarantee
And that hell's comin', hell's comin'
Hell, hell's comin' with me
— Hell's Comin' with Me, Poor Man's Poison

Chapter Notes

CW: Minor Character Death.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A young woman sat stiffly at a mahogany vanity in the master bedroom of Nottingham Hall, staring into the mirror. Behind her, she could see the open doors of the master bath, in which her husband was getting ready, and only a foot away was the door to the nursery, also open, through which she could hear her son if he began to cry. But her gaze remained on her reflection, unmoving for what could have been several hours or just one very long minute.

The woman staring back at her in the mirror was not Hermione Granger.

Hermione Granger was the three-month-old daughter of William and Helen Granger, who were both utterly un-magical, and did not yet know being otherwise was a possibility. Hermione Granger had brown eyes, like her mother's, a button nose, like her father's, and golden-brown hair that her grandmother would insist was made up of curls to put Shirley Temple's to shame, but that would really just be bushy, like a bird's nest. As she grew, she would try to stand tall and proud, despite being neither. She would ask questions, then find their answers herself and refuse any others. She would be unlikeable in her attempts to be otherwise. Until she was done growing, those attempts would be pointless, anyway, because her parents were both utterly un-magical, and she was not.

At eighteen years old, Mione Greenwood had possessed a button nose, like her father's, but golden eyes, like a stranger's. Her hair had been the darkest brown and had fallen evenly, thin and straight, down to her lower-back. She had stood tall and proud, because she had been. She had not asked questions, because she had thought she knew all the answers.

The woman in the mirror was neither Hermione Granger nor Mione Greenwood. She was twenty years old, and she had no answers to her questions, but she sat tall and proud all the same.

Her name was Lady Nott.

As the sun had risen that cold December morning, Hermione Granger and Mione Greenwood, their back aching from a night spent on a loveseat unfit for sleeping, had together formed a plan: today they must be someone else.

In a matter of hours, Nottingham Hall would be full of the most elite members of wizarding pure-blood society, deemed so by the latest head of the family who had declared itself responsible for the awarding of such memberships — despite the late Lord Cantankerus Nott's continued denial (by means of his portrait) of being responsible for the production of the *Pure-Blood Directory* pamphlets that had graced the doorsteps of every magical home in Britain in the 1930s. It was no secret that he had written *Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy*, after all. Regardless of his denial even in death, each guest knew that to be invited to an event hosted by the Notts was to be both pure and influential, and thus better than everyone else.

There was no place among them for Hermione Granger or Mione Greenwood.

Since becoming Lady Nott, the only people they had encountered were Death Eaters, or else those who sided with them. None of those people knew Hermione Granger, but they recognised Mione Greenwood; they knew of her capture, and therefore expected her insolence. The same could not be said for the others who would soon be arriving; they expected the woman they met to be like them, and therefore she had to be. If she was not, they would question whether the same was true of her son, and this could not be allowed to happen. She would likely be killed if anyone knew the truth of her identity.

Her son, too.

So, on that day, Lady Nott was required to take the stage — and a stage, it was.

She fixed her hair at the vanity, its length now just past her shoulders — she was not a teenager, nor was she some sort of hippy — and applied her makeup with great care, its result soft, elegant, and free of extravagance. The glow of her skin was a thing to envy, and the shine of her hair, too; products that had been selected by Madam Narcissa Malfoy, the names of which one might beg for. "You may be jealous of me," the final look said, "but I'm too much of a lady to be anything besides above it."

Lord Nott exited the master bath, limping after having left his walking-stick by the ottoman at the foot of the bed. He and his wife did not speak of his injury, so Lady Nott knew nothing of how it had occurred. They would both deflect should anyone ask, although this was unlikely to happen, for his injury was not new to their guests; she was. The curiosity of the masses would be directed at her today, and the night before, her husband had trained her on how to respond to their inquiries.

"How did you two meet?"

“We didn’t officially meet until the day we married, actually. We were pen-pals.”

“How long had you known each other before you married?”

“For the better part of a year. We exchanged letters almost daily while I was in school.”

“What did you write to each other about?”

“All manner of things. Life, loss, fears and ambitions, but mainly magic. My classes bored me, you see; Tavaris taught me things more my level.”

“Why was your wedding so soon, and kept private?”

“It was by no means a hasty decision, but even so, we saw no reason in waiting long enough to plan a large ceremony. I longed to have a family again, and so did Tavaris. Now we have one.”

“Were you ever wary of the age gap?” Whoever asked this was to be given a raised eyebrow for their audacity.

“Perhaps in the beginning, but truthfully, I got to know him on parchment, and the only signs of age in words is wisdom and maturity, both things I wished for in a husband.”

“Why is it that you’re only being introduced to society now?” Many of them had already been told this, but the question could still arise.

“I came down with a rather nasty case of Dragon Pox not long after the wedding, and then I got pregnant with Theodore, and I didn’t want to do anything to put the pregnancy at risk.”

Lady Nott had recited the answers in her head all through breakfast, taken in the morning room with the Malfoys.

“Your dress is hung up in there,” Lord Nott said now, with a nod to the wardrobe. Lady Nott rose and crossed the room to open it, bewildered when she found it empty of any clothes at all. “Patience, darling. I’ll show you what I mean.”

He joined her, drawing his wand, and with three taps of it against the back wall of the wardrobe, a doorway opened where there had previously been none; through it, they entered a closet half as big as the bedroom. Robes and gowns hung neatly above built-in drawers that, astonished, she opened to find both undergarments and accessories like belts, shoes, scarves, gloves, and hats. At the centre of the room was a burgundy lounge chair with a spindly table on its left and a floor-length mirror on its right.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” said Lord Nott knowingly. He strode up to a blank stretch of panelled-wall in the far-right corner and extended his free hand. “The protections on this room were updated last year. I’ll need your help entering it.”

Lady Nott showed her bemusement, but not her apprehension, and slowly placed her hand in his. He turned it over, and with a silent spell, made a small cut across the centre of her palm.

She hissed at the sting and battled the urge to tear her hand away as he smeared her blood on the wall; it soon seeped into the wood, vanishing, and a second doorway materialised.

She stared, her mouth falling open. This room was significantly smaller than the last, with thinner drawers and glass-paned cabinets that displayed a variety of glittering jewellery, including goblin-made tiaras and bejewelled wand-holsters.

Lord Nott was quick to heal her hand, relieving her of the pain. "It used to be my own blood that one needed to gain entry," he told her: "Nott blood. But there are plenty of Notts. Your blood was the wisest choice. Go on," he added, when she merely turned her stare on him instead, "pick something out."

Neither Hermione Granger nor Mione Greenwood were interested in decking themselves out in priceless jewellery, but the same could not be said of Lady Nott.

"Has Lord Malfoy seen this?" she asked, opening a drawer at random. It contained only necklaces, some of diamonds or pearls, and some with pendants of ruby, emerald, opal, amethyst, or sapphire. She looked up at him. "He had an awfully dark look on his face when they arrived yesterday. I imagine it would worsen if he saw what I'm currently seeing." She pointedly returned her gaze to the necklaces.

Lord Nott laughed.

"I doubt he'd be the only envious Malfoy. Let us be glad none of them share Esther Avery's penchant for taking things that don't belong to her."

Lady Nott pursed her lips to hide her amusement and selected a large tear-drop sapphire to hang from her neck. As she fixed the clasp, her gaze landed on the locket that had rested beside the sapphire in the velvet lining of the drawer, and her heart slammed into her chest, nearly knocking the breath out of her.

A faint sense of darkness rose into the air, bringing chills to her arms and a churning to her stomach — and Hermione Granger knew the cause of it; she knew what the serpentine "*S*" on the front of the locket signified, and she could guess as to why it was currently hidden where it was.

But Lady Nott did not and could not, so she slid the drawer shut with a shaking hand and pretended to have seen nothing out of the ordinary. She found tear-drop earrings to match the sapphire and gathered her dress from Lord Nott when he retrieved it for her from the other room.

The dress had been made two weeks prior, after her measurements had been sent out to Twilfitt and Tattings. It could have easily been mistaken for a wedding gown, and, like a wedding gown, its colour represented purity. In this case, though, that fact had nothing to do with virginity. "The Nott heir came from a pure mother," the dress said, and this was precisely the message Lady Nott needed to send.

The Great Hall below was not yet at its predicted capacity when Lord and Lady Nott entered an hour later, their son and heir, Theodore, in the latter's arms. It was, however, prepared.

The red roses that had occupied the many vases within the Hall had been replaced by white chrysanthemums and calla lilies, blue aster morning glories and peach gladiolus poppies; the decorative pillows on every sofa on the ground floor had been rearranged to Madam Narcissa's liking, and then again to Madam Ivette Nott's, when she had decided to lend a hand in decorating; the long bar had been fully stocked; a large gramophone had been positioned nearby; and every song choice on Madam Narcissa and Lady Nott's list had been tested out for all guests to hear, and later be sick of.

In the formal dining room, a buffet table had been set up by the residing house-elves of every Nott household; on it was a spread of teas, juices, fruits, pastries, and tiny finger-sandwiches. A second and much more mediaeval bassinet to the one in the nursery had also been placed in the middle of the seating area on the windowed end of the Hall; this was the spot in which Lord and Lady Nott and, as godparents, Madam Narcissa and Heir Lucius Malfoy would be stationed.

They settled on a midnight-blue camelback sofa, with Theodore resting in the bassinet between them and the amber cabriole sofa opposite, on which the youngest Malfoys sat. Lady Nott maintained her posture, sitting as if there were a metal pole attached to her spine, and kept her hands folded in her lap.

Madam Narcissa shot her a look of approval.

Small talk was made, and the other visiting Malfoys and Notts avoided touching the buffet table, for it would not do to have it looking any less full when the guests began to arrive.

By half-past twelve o'clock, witches and wizards in tailored dress robes — some sharp and in shades ranging from grey to black, others delicately patterned in pale to vibrant colours — were meandering about the Great Hall and mingling with one another in mindfully low voices and carefully polite tones. Soft, classical music emitted from the gramophone and sunlight flooded in from the two-story windows, giving the Hall the appearance of being both bright and airy. The side tables surrounding the seating area were slowly being filled by gift after gift as, one by one, each household made their approach.

"It's wonderful to make your acquaintance, Lord Rosier," Lady Nott was saying kindly. "I must say, you and your sister look very much alike."

"Ah, yes. Druella and I were often mistaken for twins when we were younger," Lord Creighton Rosier said. Behind him lurked a tired-looking house-elf with pale eyes and drooping ears. Her name — known by Hermione Granger but not by Lady Nott — was Hilly.

In 2011, Hilly would be taken away from the Rosiers to live permanently at the Headquarters of the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare, after her abuse at the hands of Lord Rosier would come to light. Hilly's favoured task at S.P.E.W. would be knitting clothes for the other elves; she would make Rose and Hugo Granger-Weasley new mittens every Christmas.

Lady Nott's face grew strained, but she kept on smiling.

“Have she and the other Blacks arrived yet?” Lord Rosier asked. “I’m afraid I’ve not seen Lady Melania since Arcturus’s funeral.”

“Nor have I, Uncle Creighton,” Madam Narcissa said sadly.

Lady Ena Rosier shot her husband a reproving look, before saying, “She’s not been out, or taken any company. I’ve considered calling on her, but I wouldn’t wish to disrupt her mourning. However,” she added firmly, “we oughtn’t speak of such things on a day like this.”

“I agree,” said Lord Nott, most pointedly.

“I know you’ve met my Evan, Lady Nott,” Lady Rosier went on, placing a hand on the shoulder of the younger of the two boys beside her, whose dark hair was slicked back with potion, “but this is our second-born, Felix. He’ll be starting at Hogwarts next September.”

“He must be thrilled,” said Lady Nott.

“He’ll be in Slytherin, of course,” said Heir Lucius confidently, “like the rest of his family.”

“Yes, I will,” said Master Felix Rosier. He raised his chin with all the haughtiness of a ten-year-old boy who had never been denied a thing. “Evan’s already told me which bed was his — that’ll be the one I’m claiming when I take his place.”

“That’s right,” said his brother. “I’ve already Hexed it in preparation.”

He received a reprimanding glare from both Lady Rosier and Madam Narcissa, but their disapproval only made him laugh. No one pointed out that to hex a bed for his brother without running the risk of harming someone else, Heir Evan Rosier would have had to use Blood Magic.

The Selwyns stopped by next: Lord Wymond and Lady Rohesia, their son, Heir Lancaster, and Heir Lancaster’s wife, Madam Fiona. Their house-elf, Sweety, who stood silently behind her mistress, would be among the first to be taken from their masters. She would wear multi-colored bows atop her head and knit clothes alongside Hilly, her best friend.

“I’ve just had the pleasure of meeting your parents and brothers, Madam Selwyn,” Lady Nott said, smiling still, “although I’m afraid Heir Rosier’s sense of humour unfortunately brought our meeting to an end.”

“He was taken away to receive a good talking to from his mother,” Lord Nott chuckled. “Apparently, he plans to leave a Hexed bed waiting in the Slytherin dormitories for his younger brother.”

“I’m not surprised,” said Madam Selwyn. “He’s always enjoyed his antics, Evan. And I’ve always enjoyed being entertained by them, seeing as I’m never the target.”

Everyone laughed — not because what she had said was amusing, but because they were supposed to think it was. Mr Drustan Bulstrode didn’t say anything particularly witty, either, when he came to congratulate Lord and Lady Nott, but they all laughed then, too. His brother, Mr Morcant Bulstrode, was the only one who did not bother pretending.

The Bulstrodes' house-elf, Una, would be another of S.P.E.W.'s permanent residents. She would work in the kitchens, where she claimed herself the happiest, and in 2019, she would give birth to a daughter, whom she and her companion, Dinny, would name Gola.

The last time Hermione Granger had seen Una, she had been even more exhausted than she looked now, after having been up all through the night attempting to soothe her teething daughter back to sleep.

Just as she did with Una and the other house-elves, Lady Nott tried not to stare at Mrs Annora Bulstrode's expanding stomach, nor think about who was growing inside of it. She did the same when the Crabbes came by, and Lady Kaelyn rambled about her cravings and smacked Dinny on the back of the head for not being quick enough to fulfil them, and again when Lady Jillian Goyle whispered to her and Madam Narcissa about her sore feet, as though they ought to be kept a secret, and shared that her house-elf, Cranky, had been giving her nightly foot massages.

Cranky would have to be carried by an Auror from the Goyle family estate in 2008, for the skin of his feet would be burnt off as punishment for accidentally knocking over a vase he would be dusting. He and Dinny would work together on the farm and make a habit of singing Celestina Warbeck to the chickens.

"The next generation of our great bloodlines fill this room!" Lord Edmund Lestrange exclaimed when Lady Desdemona Lestrange commented on the number of pregnant witches present, giving Heir Rodolphus and Madam Bellatrix a sidelong look. "They'll all be at Hogwarts together in about a decade's time —" he dropped his voice so that only a few could hear, "— and, one day, they'll be helping to continue Salazar Slytherin's work, just like their fathers."

The Lestrange family house-elf, who stared grimly at the floor by his master, had greyish, wrinkled skin and a thick and twisting scar that ran down the right side of his face. His name was Rascal. He would be the very first house-elf taken in by S.P.E.W. — one of the elders who would oversee the day-to-day running of Headquarters, and to whom all its residents would report.

When the time came for Hermione Granger to meet him, Rascal would be missing his left eye.

Lady Nott's smile felt more like a grimace. Excusing herself, she went for a bite to eat to give the muscles of her face a chance to relax.

As she filled a small plate for herself at the buffet table, she was approached by a woman to whom she had not yet been introduced, and who had ringlets of brown hair, freckled cheeks, and kind blue eyes.

"Lady Nott," the woman greeted in a warm voice, offering her a tremulous smile. She stuck out her hand. "I'm Morgan Travers."

"Oh," Lady Nott breathed, her mouth going suddenly dry. She blinked, then hastily clasped the woman's hand. "It's a pleasure, Lady Travers —"

“Please, call me Morgan. Lady Morgan, if you must.”

“I insist you call me Lady Mione, then.”

Lady Morgan nodded, her smile growing somewhat weaker, somehow sad. She turned abruptly and began to peruse the buffet table. When she spoke again, it was in a voice barely above a whisper.

“I don’t know if you’re aware, but my daughter, Aisling, is the sister-in-law of your friend Marlene.”

Lady Nott held her breath and pretended to study the tea selections. She shuffled closer to Lady Morgan.

“I visited the McKinnons the day after Lachlan and I got our invitation in the post — told Marlene I’d be meeting you soon enough. I’d wondered if she wanted to send you a message of some sort.” Dinny appeared beside them, and Lady Morgan paused to let out an irritable huff. “Beg your pardon but I absolutely loathe these finger-sandwiches. If I’m to be indulging myself, I don’t want to do it with cream-cheese and cucumbers shoved between two slices of questionably moist bread.”

“Not to worry, Lady Morgan, I’m quite with you on that one,” said Lady Nott breezily. “Try the treacle tart. Our house-elves got a lot of practice making it while I was pregnant with Theodore — I can’t stand to eat it now but that doesn’t make it any less delicious.”

Dinny hurried back to the Crabbes, carrying with him a plate of pastries, on top of which was a large slice of treacle tart.

“Now, I don’t have anything from *Marlene* to give you,” Lady Morgan said, picking up where she left off, “but I *do* have a letter from someone else. Marlene thought on it, you see, and she told her friend what I’d said about seeing you. As it turns out, that friend was quite desperate to send you something. They told me the best way to sneak it in was to strap it to my leg with a garter belt — learnt that trick from you, apparently.”

Lady Nott’s heart was beating very fast.

“Madam Narcissa told me you opposed the decision to disown your daughter,” she whispered, “which means my husband probably knows. He’ll be suspicious of anything you hand me.”

“Then I won’t hand it to you,” said Lady Morgan simply. “Congratulations, again, on your heir, Lady Mione,” she added, in a much louder voice, and with that, she walked away.

Lady Nott returned to her husband on legs that felt like they were made of noodles rather than bones. She offered him food off her plate as the Rowles neared, let him kiss her on the cheek, and laughed when he said, “This hasn’t been poisoned, has it?”

“Lord Nott, Lady Nott. Heir and Madam Malfoy,” Lord Gerlach Rowle greeted, inclining his head to each of the four of them in turn. “My sincerest congratulations.”

“Thank you, Lord Rowle,” said Lady Nott, while Lord Nott finished chewing a macaroon. “There aren’t enough words to describe our joy over Theodore’s birth.”

“I imagine so,” said Lady Lidwina Rowle. Beaming, she patted the arm of the massive blond beside her. “I can remember how happy we were when Thorfinn was born.”

On her other side, a man both smaller and younger, who had equally blond hair, cleared his throat loudly.

“Yes, yes, we were just as happy when you came along, Halfdan.”

Master Halfdan Rowle rolled his eyes. Meanwhile, Heir Thorfinn Rowle and the broad-shouldered woman hanging off his arm both grinned.

“Lady Nott,” Heir Rowle said, with a friendly air that was betrayed by the mischievous glint in his eyes, “I am honoured to finally meet you. I’ve heard word of your intelligence from our — *ah* —common acquaintances.” He winked.

“Yes, indeed,” said Lord Rowle, in a low voice and with a gaze that dipped even lower.

With a false casualness, Lord Nott dropped his hand onto the knee of Lady Nott’s furthest from him, his arm now blocking her chest from Lord Rowle’s perusal.

“Darling, this is Heir Rowle’s wife,” he said, drawing the attention away from her, and the conversation towards a safer subject, “Euphemia Rowle.”

Or so he thought.

Madam Euphemia Rowle smiled at Lady Nott, who felt what was left of her own smile slide straight off her face. Her blood ran cold, then suddenly hot as anger rose from the pit of her stomach.

This was the woman who would be paid in Malfoy gold to raise Delphini Riddle, and who would keep her a secret from the wizarding world until it would be too late to recognise the threat she posed.

“It’s a pleasure, Lady Nott,” Madam Rowle said. “Madam Narcissa tells me the two of you have been quite often in each other’s company lately. You should join us for tea some time — oh, but wait —” her smile turned mocking, “— you can’t, can you?”

With difficulty, Lady Nott feigned confusion.

“It was good speaking with you, Lord Rowle,” said Lord Nott abruptly.

Taking the hint, Lord Rowle offered them a final, “Congratulations,” set down their gift, and led his family away. The moment they disappeared into the crowd, Lord Nott squeezed Lady Nott’s knee, and leaned in to whisper so that only she could hear, “Stop acting like you’re really Narcissa under the guise of Polyjuice Potion. It’s unsettling.”

“I thought you’d be pleased,” she replied, her gaze following Madam Rowle as she eagerly greeted Madam Selwyn some fifteen yards away. “I’m being the perfect pure-blood lady, am I not? Isn’t that how you wanted me to act?”

“No. It’s boring. Stop it. If I had wished to marry Narcissa, I would have.”

“You think?” said Lady Nott doubtfully.

Lord Nott snorted. “No, of course not, Cygnus knows me too well — but that’s beside the point.”

“Get to the point, then.”

He gave a pleased sigh.

“That’s better.”

At last, Lady Nott tore her gaze from Madam Rowle. She looked sideways at her husband, the heat of her ire still tangible on her skin.

“Don’t act so docile,” he said. “Poised, well-mannered, gracious — yes — but for Merlin’s sake, Mione, speak up when you’ve been insulted. It is *astounding* that you must be told this when you’ve never had any trouble with it before.”

Theodore began to cry from within the bassinet, effectively bringing their argument to an end. Lord Nott announced that their son had to be taken away for a feeding (and a change, only no one wished to hear about that), but would be rejoining them all shortly. Lady Nott took Theodore into her arms once more, and the three of them left the Great Hall.

When they neared the second-floor landing, they found Dinky waiting for them at the top of the stairs.

“Do not leave his side, do you understand?” Lady Nott told them strictly, as she handed Theodore over. “Not until he’s been retrieved by either his father or —”

A small gust of wind flew up her skirt from between the balusters, and she felt something thin with rough edges skid across the skin of her inner-thigh to slip under her garter belt —

“— myself,” she finished, grabbing the railing to steady herself. She swallowed, forcing her shoulders to relax, then straightened once more. “You mustn’t let anyone else near him. And his milk — don’t forget to warm it up first.”

“Yes, Mistress,” Dinky said, with forced patience. “Yous forgetting Dinky knows — forgetting Dinky be minding babies longer than yous being alive.”

“Just go, Dinky,” said Lord Nott curtly. His gaze rested on his wife as Dinky bowed their head, unable to dip any lower than that with Theodore in their arms. Even the sound of their Disapparation did not break his narrow-eyed stare.

“What?” snapped Lady Nott, her face hot.

He shook his head slowly, as if to free himself from his thoughts.

“I’m going to powder my nose before we return,” she said, turning back round (it would be improper, Madam Narcissa had once explained, for a lady to admit she had to use the bathroom). She started down the stairs with Lord Nott following close behind.

“Only one more hour,” he said, as though to reassure her, “and then you’ll be able to drop whatever facade this is.”

She frowned at him over her shoulder.

“The majority of our guests aren’t to leave until five.”

Annoyingly, Lord Nott did not reply. Instead, he patted her on the shoulder and moved to sit on the ottoman by the powder-room door.

“I’ll wait for you.”

Frowning still, Lady Nott slipped inside the powder room. As soon as she had shut the door, she lifted the skirt of her dress and reached down to remove the thin letter that had slipped so suddenly into her garter belt. On the front, in a hand-writing not unfamiliar, it read simply: *Mione*.

Her heart stuttered. She threw a glance at the door, terrified that Lord Nott would suddenly barge in and catch her with the letter that Lady Morgan had clearly used a Banishing Charm to deliver to her whilst they had been loitering on the stairs. What would happen to her if he found out? What would happen to Lady Morgan?

It was too risky to read the letter just then; it would have to wait until her performance was over, and she was herself again.

With trembling hands, Lady Nott placed the letter back where she had found it. She then stuck her hands under the faucet of the sink, and ran them along the back of her neck, soothing her nerves with the cool water.

Fifteen minutes later, she was back with her husband and greeting the Carrows with a fresh smile on her face, as if two of them would not be directly responsible for the torture of countless underaged witches and wizards.

“Juniper is disappointed she couldn’t be here today,” Mr Elric Carrow said, “but Flora and Hestia both woke with high fevers this morning, and since we’re between house-elves at the moment, there’s no one else to mind them.”

Between house-elves, Lady Nott thought in horror, praying that their last one had simply died of old age. Based on the fact that Hermione Granger had never met a Carrow house-elf — and the accusatory look Mr Carrow gave his younger siblings — she doubted it.

The next half an hour wore on with painstaking slowness. Lady Nott ignored the churning of her stomach, the sweating of her palms, and the rapidness of her heart, pretending away her

ever-persistent anxiety. It took great effort to ignore the letter that was constantly grazing her skin, and to keep her gaze from falling upon the many house-elves trailing after their masters.

How odd was it that it was the guests whose names she had to study, and not those of their servants?

She met the Yaxleys, and was successfully mild towards them, then the Flints, and, surprising even herself, spent several pleasant minutes entertaining their four-year-old son, Mr Marcus. Further surprising was when she was introduced to the six Parkinsons and spent even longer holding two-month-old Miss Pansy, who gazed up at her as if she were a shiny object by which to be utterly enraptured. In fairness, Lady Nott was rather enraptured herself.

"She's beautiful, Madam Parkinson," she said, and, enraptured or not, she wasn't too sure she meant it.

Madam Aurelia Parkinson scoffed, as if to say, "Obviously." What she really said, however, was, "Just like her mother," and this was not much better. But then she snickered, adding, "Looked a bit like a pug when she came out, though — *that* certainly wasn't *my* genetics at play."

Heir Presleigh Parkinson let his breath out in a huff, shaking his head wearily. His sister, Miss Preciosa, crossed her arms bitterly. It was clear that they had heard this joke before.

Seven-year-old Miss Pippa Macmillan had the auburn hair of her mother, Lady Honoria, and a great desire to play grown-up by fitting herself between Lord and Lady Nott on the sofa and holding Theodore, recently returned.

"He's so cute!" she squealed.

"Well, you only have to wait a month or so longer," Lady Nott told her, smiling, for the first time all day, with real joy, "and then you'll have a baby at your own home to hold."

Lady Macmillan grinned tiredly from the opposite sofa, onto which Madam Narcissa had swiftly ushered her. Her stomach looked fit to burst.

"Less than that, I hope," Lady Macmillan said. "I don't know if I can handle this much longer." She let out a long sigh. "Our little Ernest has taught me there truly is such a thing as an *easy* pregnancy, because compared to my experience carrying Pippa, this one has most certainly been *not*."

"You've already picked his name?" said Lady Nott softly.

"'To be earnest and sincere,' it means," said Lord Oswald Macmillan proudly. "We couldn't think of anything better."

Raising an eyebrow, Madam Narcissa glanced over at Pippa, who was still happily cooing at Theodore. Obviously, she was wondering why the Macmillans couldn't think of a better name for their firstborn. Then again, not everyone considered naming their child after some obscure constellation to be particularly creative.

“Oh, Winnie!” Lady Macmillan cried suddenly, waving her hand above her head to seize the attention of two new arrivals. “And, Barty, dear, how are you?”

“I’m well, thank you, Aunt Honoria,” said Mr Bartemius Crouch Jr, leaning down to give her a peck on the cheek. He straightened just as his mother, Mrs Winifred Crouch, bent to do the same. She was a small, frail-looking woman, with the same straw-coloured hair as her son, and she gave the impression of someone who was, in many ways, very fragile.

“Forgive me, Ria,” Mrs Crouch said, “we got held up at the bar. Morgan and I got to chatting, and you know how she and I tend to get carried away.” She laughed softly at herself. “Barty and Carden certainly got restless waiting for us to finish up.”

“We were fine, Mother,” said her son patiently, although he still rolled his eyes. “We had a lot to catch up on. I’ve hardly seen him since he left Hogwarts.”

“Lachlan and Morgan Travers’ youngest didn’t make it past his third year,” Lord Nott explained to Lady Nott in an undertone. “He was too embarrassed to go back, so Morgan agreed to homeschool him.”

“Oh, I am so sorry!” Mrs Crouch exclaimed bashfully. She hurried over to grasp Lady Nott’s hands. “It is lovely to finally meet you, Lady Nott — and congratulations on the birth of your son.”

“Thank you, Mrs Crouch.”

“Bartemius felt bad that he couldn’t be here today. You know how things are at the Ministry right now, Tavaris. Always working, he is … always, always working …” She shook her head with a sigh, whilst her son’s expression visibly tightened. “He asked me to pass on his congratulations.”

“Give him my thanks,” said Lord Nott warmly — or, rather, in a voice that sounded warm.

“Aunt Winnie, look!” said Miss Pippa excitedly. “Lady Nott let me hold Heir Theodore!”

“How wonderful, sweetness!”

“Best not drop him, then.”

“Barty, don’t say that, you’ll jinx it!”

“I’m only teasing, Pip.”

Lady Nott felt sick again. It had been a very long time since she had been forced to socialise with so many people at once, and the identities of those many people made it even more difficult, especially when they were joined by the Traverses.

She greeted Lord Lachlan and Master Carden as kindly as she had those before them, spoke amiably (but not too amiably) to Lady Morgan, then took Theodore from Miss Pippa as an excuse not to shake Heir Eamon’s hand. Thankfully, the Macmillans, Crouches, and

Traverses left them soon after the latter had said their congratulations, and she was able to breathe again.

It was a quarter-till-four when the Blacks finally made an appearance. All nine of them swept into the Hall with all the grandeur of a house that claimed itself, *Noble and Most Ancient*, and headed straight for Lord and Lady Nott, who were speaking with the Greengrasses.

Lady Melania Black clasped their hands in greeting as though to do so was to bestow a great honour upon them. She had fair hair that was steadily becoming silver, cool eyes, and was one of the few women present to arrive wearing all black. Whilst Lady Nott's attire represented purity, Lady Black's represented the mourning of her late husband, Lord Arcturus III.

The new Lord Black, Orion, was just as withdrawn as his mother, and just as paranoid as he had been the last time Lady Nott had laid eyes on him. Even now, he scanned her person for any sign of a wand. She had no idea what it was about her that inspired such caution, but instilling fear in powerful men was nonetheless a nice feeling.

Madam Irma, meanwhile, was decidedly not withdrawn and would have been a hundred times more pleasurable to converse with if she were. Despite their differing appearances, in terms of personality, she was, in the most obvious way one could possibly imagine, the mother of Madam Walburga. Her husband, Mr Pollux Black, on the other hand, seemed like a man who played poker, and a cigar would not have looked out of place between his thick knuckles.

The unmarried younger sister of Pollux — sister, too, of Marius Black, disowned Squib, and the late Dorea Potter, aunt of James Potter — was saddening to look at.

And drunk.

"You were a friend of Walburga's filthy disgrace of a son, is that right, Lady Nott?" Madam Cassiopeia said bluntly. As if the weight of her daring was too much for her to carry, she swayed slightly with her speech, causing Lady Black's lips to purse. "*And* … and my sister's scum nephew … Yet here you are — a Nott."

She laughed shrilly, seemingly ignorant to the discomfort of those around her. Theodore, currently in the arms of Madam Narcissa, whimpered in distress at the tension.

"*Cassiopeia*," Lady Black said, in a warning voice.

"Do not admonish her for saying what we are all thinking, Melania," said Madam Walburga loudly. She gave Lady Nott a look of deep disdain. "Mutts can be beaten into obedience, this is true, but sometimes … they simply need to be put down."

Lady Ivanna Greengrass looked scandalised. Her daughter-in-law, the heavily pregnant Madam Cecillia, had her mouth hanging open in shock.

"*Madams* Black," said Lord Nott coldly, rising to his feet, "once more you astound me with your audacity. You come into *my* home —"

“I will take care of this, Lord Nott, thank you,” Lord Black cut in. He took his wife’s arm, adding to her, “Let us peruse the buffet selections.” With his other hand on Madam Cassiopeia’s back, he led both women away.

Mr Black gestured for Madam Irma to follow them, but his wife just stomped her foot like a bad-tempered child.

“I beg your forgiveness on behalf of my relatives, Lord and Lady Nott,” said Lady Black smoothly. She looked at the Greengrasses. “I assure you this is not their usual behaviour, and certainly not that of myself or my grandson. We are all coping with my husband’s passing as best as we can, and I must ask for your patience at this time.”

Lord Nathaniel Greengrass glanced down at his daughter, Miss Bedelia, who stood next to Heir Regulus Black like a ballerina figurine in an antique jewellery box, waiting to be wound up for a dance. She smiled reassuringly, giving him the barest shake of a head, as though to convey that her betrothed truly did not take after his mother. “It’s fine, Father,” that look said, “trust me.”

Taking her word for it — or lack thereof — Lord Greengrass turned back to Lady Black and smiled his own reassurance. “Don’t worry,” this look said, “the betrothal suffers no doubt.”

The way Heir Regulus was looking at Miss Bedelia’s arm where it was looped through his own seemed to counter that statement, but no one appeared to notice.

Lady Nott moved to stand at the edge of the group with him, Miss Bedelia, and Madam Narcissa, and immediately took Theodore into her arms to calm him down.

“I apologise for my mother’s callousness, Lady Nott,” Heir Regulus told her, in a tight voice. “That was completely uncalled for.”

“It’s no matter,” she sighed, holding Theodore close as she rocked him. She peered down at his tiny face, wet with tears. “Oh, Theodore, my Theodore … there’s no need to cry, my love …” She kept talking, filling his ears with the sound of her voice until, finally, he calmed.

“He’s so sweet, Lady Nott,” said Miss Bedelia, looking slightly awed. “Might I hold him?”

Lady Nott looked up, about to reply, but words failed her as she found her gaze falling elsewhere. The sound of conversation seemed to dim, becoming no more than the static of an old, broken television. She stared at the entrance to the formal dining room, through which she had a clear view of the buffet table, and felt the blood drain from her face.

Lord Black had staggered backwards into the table, jostling its contents, and was clutching desperately at his chest.

“There’s a curse in one of my great-grandfather’s journals that causes plaque to build up in the walls of the arteries that supply blood to the heart … the arteries are forced to narrow, not over time as they would naturally, but within the span of a few minutes …”

Her breathing grew unsteady as she watched Madam Walburga turn to her husband in alarm.

“Eventually, the path of the blood to the heart is entirely blocked, therefore triggering a heart attack …”

“Lady Nott?”

Lady Nott tore her eyes away sharply, her heart pounding, and looked now at Heir Regulus. He raised an eyebrow at her, and she quickly looked away again.

“Of course, you may, Miss Bedelia,” she said abruptly, forcing herself to smile again. She handed Theodore over hurriedly. “Let us take him somewhere quieter, though, so he might be given a reprieve from all the noise. Have any of you gotten the chance to see the natatorium yet?”

Without pause, she took Heir Regulus’ arm and began leading them in the opposite direction of the formal dining room. Madam Narcissa shot her a quizzical look, but followed without question.

“I’m told it was modelled after the Prefects’ bath at Hogwarts,” Lady Nott continued, perhaps a little too rapidly, “although I’m afraid I cannot adequately compare them, having not seen the Prefects’ bath myself — but, Regulus, you’re a prefect, aren’t you?”

“I am,” said Heir Regulus haltingly.

“I’m also a prefect,” said Miss Bedelia, beaming. “I believe Madam Malfoy was, too, when she was at Hogwarts.”

“Yes, I quite enjoyed it,” said Madam Narcissa, as they stepped up through a tall archway and into a lavishly-decorated lounge. Gasps sounded from behind them, and she startled, but before she could look back to see what had caused the disturbance, Lady Nott had taken her arm as well.

Her grasp remained unyielding as they cut across the lounge and went through a large, open doorway on the right, sweeping into the conservatory. Magical plants lined their path, some of their vines extending in a stretch, as if freshly awoken, and others bouncing eagerly within their pots.

“Just through here —” the large stone doors on the opposite side of the long, sunlit room opened at their approach, as though sensing their intention, “— you’ll see, it’s quite extraordinary.”

The natatorium was nearly as massive as the Great Hall, stretching some forty yards in length. Floor-length windows identical to those in the conservatory brought sunshine in to sparkle across the surface of the pool, its water a clear blue. The white marble deck, too, gleamed with it, and along the sides of the room were lounge chairs and side tables, on which sat crystal vases of white roses and baby’s breath.

Madam Narcissa spared the pool a single glance before freeing her arm and looking behind her in concern. There was a far-off shriek, barely audible, before the doors on the opposite end of the conservatory swung shut to block out the noise.

She took a step closer.

“Lady Nott —”

“Isn’t it lovely?” Lady Nott said, with that same falsely bright smile. Her face still felt pale, its skin stretched to its limit.

“Truly,” said Miss Bedelia unwittingly, as she looked about with interest. She hoisted Theodore up a little higher to point the water out to him, smiling softly. “It’s beautiful, don’t you think, Heir Theodore? I bet you’ll be swimming in there yourself someday, once you’ve gotten a little bit older.”

“Most assuredly,” said Lady Nott. Her nails were digging into Heir Regulus’ forearm; she could sense him looking at her, but refused to meet his gaze. His upbringing was likely the only thing stopping him from tearing his arm from her grasp. “I plan on teaching him how to swim in this pool. A good skill to have, wouldn’t you say?”

Miss Bedelia nodded. “There’s a small pond on the edge of our property that my brother and I used to swim in all the time when we were younger, with Heir Presleigh and Miss Preciosa. I adored it. Still do. What about you, Heir Regulus?” she added curiously.

Heir Regulus jerked his head towards her, as if he had forgotten she was there.

“We have a summer home in Nice,” he said, after a moment, “right by the ocean. We — I — spend most of my time there in the water.”

“You enjoy it, then?” asked Miss Bedelia. “Swimming?”

“I do.”

“He’s very good,” Madam Narcissa put in lightly, without removing her eyes from the doors. “Even when the waves are at their roughest and Uncle Orion is calling him back to shore, he swims on, perfectly at ease.”

Lady Nott forced herself to swallow the bile rising in her throat, letting the taste burn.

Just then, the doors to the lounge burst open with a force that had them falling shut again with a resounding *SLAM*. All at once, she, Miss Bedelia, and Heir Regulus spun round to see the young Mr Crouch striding towards them to stop at the entrance to the natatorium, panting slightly.

He only had eyes for Heir Regulus.

“Reggie,” he began hoarsely, “I’m so sorry … It’s your father — he’s had a heart attack —”

Heir Regulus inhaled sharply, his own grasp on Lady Nott tightening now —

“— and he didn’t …” Mr Crouch shook his head grimly. “He didn’t make it.”

For a long moment, there was only silence. No one moved a muscle, frozen in place, apparently unable to comprehend what they had just heard. Not even Theodore let out so much as a peep.

At last, Heir Regulus slipped away from Lady Nott to start, with slow, mechanical steps, towards Mr Crouch. He stopped directly in front of him, his face a ghostly white, and whispered, “Is he dead?”

Mr Crouch’s words appeared to pain him. “Yeah, Reggie. He’s dead.”

Heir Regulus nodded absently, his eyes glazing over, unfocused rather than tearful. He raised his hand in a way that made it appear as though someone else was raising it for him, and, hesitating briefly, allowed it to drop onto Mr Crouch’s arm; Mr Crouch swiftly grasped his elbow, holding him there.

In the time that the two of them spent simply standing there, neither of them speaking, it seemed like, to them, the rest of the world had ceased to exist, leaving only their clasped arms, Heir Regulus’ dazed look, and Mr Crouch’s worried gaze on it.

And then the latter said, sounding as though it nearly killed him to rush Heir Regulus along, “Your family is waiting for you. You need to go now, Reggie.”

He received another absent nod in response, but it was response enough; with his hand hovering carefully at the small of Heir Regulus’ back, he steered him away, back through the conservatory.

“Oh,” Miss Bedelia breathed, a small, sorrowful sound, as she watched them go. Mr Crouch’s hand grazed Heir Regulus’ back, just for a second, before it fell away when they disappeared into the lounge. “Oh, I see.”

She took a deep, steadying breath, nodded to herself, and turned to Lady Nott. With great care, she placed Theodore back into his mother’s arms.

“Thank you for letting me hold him for a while. It was a wonderful party, Lady Nott. Congratulations, again.” With a curtsey, Miss Bedelia hurried after Heir Regulus and Mr Crouch.

Once more, silence filled the natatorium. The sunlight seemed too bright, its warmth harsh and unsympathetic; it was almost disrespectful of it to continue shining.

Eventually, Madam Narcissa spoke.

“You knew.”

Lady Nott turned to find her already facing her; Madam Narcissa’s expression was neither angry nor accusatory, but quietly horrified, as though she had just come to a terrible understanding. Her cool, blue eyes were sparkling like the water of the pool, full of tears that had yet to fall.

“You knew,” she repeated.

Lady Nott said nothing.

“You didn’t want Regulus to see it happen. That’s why you …” Madam Narcissa trailed off.

“The death of a parent,” said Lady Nott quietly, “is not something any child should be forced to witness.”

A few tears escaped to slide down Madam Narcissa’s cheeks. She did not speak again.

It was in that moment, standing silently in the sunlit natatorium of Nottingham Hall, that Lady Nott watched the very last of Madam Narcissa’s naivety shatter, falling at her feet like shards of rose-coloured glass, as she realised precisely what her loved ones had signed themselves up for by following the Dark Lord.

*

Just as Tavaris had claimed, the celebration of Theodore’s birth had come to an end by the time the clock struck five, and the Great Hall had been emptied of many of its guests. The music from the gramophone was no longer soft and the voices of the people meandering about were no longer low and polite; the sun had gone down as the sound had risen, leaving them bathed only in the light of the chandeliers, which cast shadows upon every corner of the Hall; and the buffet table had been put away, leaving the bar to be swarmed in its place, in a second and very different sort of celebration.

There had been twenty-eight names accompanied by a star on the guest list: twenty-eight Death Eaters. And yet fifty-six guests had stayed.

Apart from Regulus Black and Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy, who had all left with the rest of the Black family, and Barty Crouch Jr, who had departed shortly thereafter with his mother, these were the members of the Sacred Twenty-Eight who supported the Dark Lord strongly enough to stand in his presence and be glad to do so. They flocked to him as he lounged in the windowed seating area at the end of the Hall, where the bassinet for Theodore had been less than an hour ago, and each of them seemed grateful to be given even a minute of his time. Some spoke to him about his plans or ideals, whilst others spoke in Galleons, but they all spoke.

Lady Nott had no answers to her questions, because she was not supposed to ask them. Mione Greenwood did not ask questions, either, because she thought she already had all the answers. But Hermione Granger did ask, and no matter what she was told, she always found the answers herself.

If at least six of the fifty-six guests present would die before the end of the second wizarding war, and Hermione had seen twelve of them in cells on her last inspection of Azkaban, then what would become of the remaining thirty-eight?

The answer was simple: they would walk free.

And these were only the Dark Lord’s followers within the Sacred Twenty-Eight. She knew for a fact that there were more of them.

Azkaban had gained a great many new residents following the end of the second wizarding war: twenty Snatchers, Fenrir Greyback and six members of his pack, Dolores Umbridge, and eight other citizens who had, like Albert Runcorn, been found guilty of committing minor to major war crimes within the Ministry of Magic, most of whom had served out their sentences by 2020.

But only sixteen Marked Death Eaters had survived to be imprisoned.

Hermione repeatedly counted the heads of their guests while she sat at Tavaris' side on the opposite end of the camel-back sofa as the Dark Lord, as was her duty as hostess — and what a joke that title was. For a long time, she ignored the conversations permeating around her, her concentration on the calculations that raced through her head.

Morgan Travers was the first to be subtracted from the equation; as far as Hermione was concerned, she was only as guilty as Narcissa — if not, less. She then considered the visiting Notts. Three-year-old Delany had been ushered away by Aunt Adelaide the moment Orion Black's heart had stopped, but the other Notts were just as immersed in the celebration as everyone else. Hermione did not know which of them were guilty, nor did she know of what, but she was determined to find out.

Suddenly, the Dark Lord was standing.

"We shall continue this discussion later," he told the Mulcibers, who were the latest to hover at his side, before then turning to Hermione. He smiled, his gaze as sharp as ever, and held out his arm. "Lady Nott, would you join me for a turn about the room?"

She glanced at Tavaris; at his nod, she, too, rose. When she reached the Dark Lord, he did not move, but kept his arm out, waiting, as if he truly expected her to take it. Out of the fifty-nine people currently in the Hall, she was the only one without a wand, so, reluctantly, she did.

His touch made her skin crawl.

"In the time that you have been with us, you have met some of my greatest followers," the Dark Lord said as they set off, "my closest … *confidantes* … but my ranks are made up of far more than those select few, and I would like for you to become acquainted with some of the others."

"I met all of these people today," Hermione reminded him. She was proud of the steadiness of her voice, even though she knew he could sense her wariness without needing to hear it.

He lifted one shoulder in a semblance of a shrug, his lips twitching in what she recognised as amusement.

"Indulge me."

The first group he brought her to consisted of Morcant Bulstrode, the future father of Millicent Bulstrode, Emil Flint, the father of Marcus Flint, and Elric, Amycus, and Alecto Carrow.

“Good evening, my Lord,” Elric said at once, as all five of them bowed their heads. The real bowing had already taken place when the Dark Lord had first entered the Hall, but further bowing was apparently required whenever one was within a two-metre radius of him.

“It certainly is,” replied the Dark Lord. His speech seemed to permit them to raise their heads again. “I have taken it upon myself to properly introduce our dear Lady Nott to all my most faithful. The introductions that took place earlier, I’m sure, were not nearly sufficient to be to my liking.”

Both Bulstrode and Alecto narrowed their eyes at Hermione’s proximity to him, appearing more curious than envious, but neither said anything of it. Flint, meanwhile, raised his heavy brow.

“I see,” he said, sounding like he did not. “Well, it is a — er — pleasure to meet you once more, Lady Nott.”

Hermione merely looked at him, no longer afraid to show her disinterest.

“*Oh*. Oh, no, *I* see,” said Elric, with a low, throaty chuckle. “Yes, I see.”

No one bothered to ask him what he saw.

“From what I’ve heard about her, my Lord —” Alecto glanced sideways at Bulstrode and Flint, seeming to hesitate (*Ah,* Hermione thought, *they’re low-ranking*), “— our earlier introduction did leave me rather taken aback.”

“Did my politeness startle you, Alecto?” asked Hermione icily. “I suppose you were under the impression that blood traitors like myself were without manners, is that it?”

Amycus let out a surprised laugh.

“How is it that Nott expects this girl to raise him a good heir?” he asked the group at large. “Personally, I think blood traitors should be kept away from children. Just infect them, wouldn’t they? With all their silly little *ideas*.”

Hermione felt her upper lip curl into a sneer.

“As if *you* would know anything about raising *children*.”

The Dark Lord led her away after that, his lips twitching again.

Three, she counted. *Maybe they’re not all Marked, but still.*

The Selwyns and Rosiers made up the next group. Out of all of them, Lancaster Selwyn was the only one sitting in a cell back in 2020, although Evan would have been had he not been killed by Alastor Moody. The conversation was brief, but by the time she and the Dark Lord departed, Hermione was able to deduce that both Lancaster’s father, Wymond, and Creighton Rosier were also Death Eaters. Felix Rosier was too young, and Ena Rosier and Fiona and Rohesia Selwyn seemed to be three more cases of Narcissa’s silent observation and dutiful

agreeability, which came as no shock to Hermione; after all, many of these pure-blood witches had been brought up to do and be nothing more than just that.

Five.

The Rowles, Goyles, and Crabbes had congregated near the bar, and every one of them, including the seven-months pregnant Kaelyn Crabbe, had a drink in hand.

"You oughtn't be drinking," Hermione told her, before they had even finished raising their heads from their bows. "Alcohol consumption whilst pregnant can lead to miscarriage, premature birth, and the baby having a low birthweight."

Kaelyn's mouth dropped open. Her face was flushed from how much she appeared to have already consumed.

"The baby can also develop learning and behavioural issues," Hermione went on unsympathetically, "hyperactivity and poor impulse control, troubles with speech, and difficulty managing emotions and social skills. So, perhaps you should put that down."

Looking deeply unsettled, Landon Crabbe hastily removed the glass from his dumbstruck wife's hand.

"Excuse us, my Lord," he murmured quickly, and he ushered Kaelyn away.

Without a word, Jillian Goyle stepped back to discard her own drink on the nearest end table.

"Your baby shall be perfectly fine, Jillian," Euphemia Rowle said comfortingly when Jillian returned. She shot Hermione a disdainful look. "Do ignore her. She hasn't a clue what she's talking about, anyway."

The Dark Lord made a noise of disagreement.

"She was raised in the Muggle world, my Lord, with Muggle sciences. How might she possibly be more knowledgeable in this area than us?"

Thorfinn gave her a warning look, obviously telling her to watch her tone. He was the only one of the Rowles to have been put away. In the Battle of the Astronomy Tower, he had tried to take Remus out with a Killing Curse and had instead hit one of his fellow Death Eaters, Brinley Gibbon, Healer Gibbon's husband. Hermione ground her teeth together as she looked at him.

"My Lord?" Euphemia said again, politer.

"I believe, Mrs Rowle," said the Dark Lord, looking down at her in more ways than one, "you would be surprised by just how knowledgeable Lady Nott is."

She bowed her head once more, as if in apology. He did not spare her another glance.

And she's the one who'll be raising his daughter, thought Hermione, returning Euphemia's disdain with a contemptuous look of her own.

“Gerlach, here, was among the earliest of my supporters, Lady Nott,” the Dark Lord said, easily changing the subject. “He’s been with us for as long as his eldest son has been alive, and now that son has taken my Mark as well.”

Gerlach Rowle puffed his chest out proudly. Lidwina smiled up at him, just as proud. Hermione knew that they had both been aware of Delphini Riddle’s existence, but she had not known that Gerlach was also a Death Eater.

Six.

“And in a few years’ time, his second son will also be taking my Mark.”

“I’m looking forward to it, my Lord,” said Halfdan eagerly. He could not have been older than fourteen. “It will be a great honour to follow in my father’s and brother’s footsteps.”

Seven?

The Dark Lord granted him a slight smile, but appeared finished with this encounter; he took Hermione away again.

Clovis Yaxley, who was among the next batch of people to whom she was reintroduced, was baffled by Hermione’s change of character, especially since Hermione spent the entirety of her five minutes in the Yaxleys’ presence glaring at her son, Corban. Loretta Yaxley, on the other hand, was not, which led Hermione to believe that she was privy to a lot more than the other wives were.

Her husband probably killed her sister-in-law, and his master had her second-cousin imprisoned in a cellar, but right now she’s bowing just like the rest of them.

When the Dark Lord called Loretta by her first name, Hermione added her to the count.

Eight.

It turned out that Beldon Yaxley was a great benefactor of the Dark Lord’s cause, and had been for over a decade. As far as she was concerned, this was good enough for him to be counted as well.

Nine.

The remaining Parkinsons, which consisted of all but Pansy, had taken seats at the bar with Elias, Esther, and Gaspar Avery. Before Hermione was given the opportunity to speak any of them, however, she caught a glimpse of silver sticking out the top of Esther’s gown, glinting in the candlelight.

“That wouldn’t happen to be our silverware in your bra, would it, Esther?”

Esther spluttered, her face rapidly turning red.

“*For fuck’s sake*, Esther!” Elias shoved his tumbler of firewhiskey away from himself and reached right down the front of his wife’s gown, grumbling angrily under his breath. “*Every*

time … every bloody time …"

He pulled out four butter spreaders, three dinner knives, two salad forks, and one teaspoon and dumped them all onto the bar.

"Mother, c'mon," Gaspar snickered, "you didn't even manage a full set. You're getting rusty in your old age."

Elias took a second to slap his son upside the head before returning his ire to his mortified wife.

"Get out of here before Tavaris finds out what you did. We'll see you at home."

Esther gave Hermione a look of immense loathing before hopping from her stool and storming off through the crowd. When she glanced back, scowling, Hermione waved her fingers mockingly.

"I'm sorry you had to see that, my Lord," said Elias.

"Not to worry, Elias," smirked the Dark Lord. "Wives with a love for knives are not as uncommon as you think."

His eyes lighting up in mirth, Gaspar choked on his next sip, and firewhiskey promptly shot out of his nose. While he fought to recover, his father clapping him on the back, the Dark Lord turned to introduce Hermione to the Parkinsons. Like Beldon Yaxley, Paulus and Presleigh turned out to be benefactors themselves. Their conversation was short, much to their obvious disappointment, but as Hermione strode away with the Dark Lord, she added two more to the tally.

Eleven.

It struck her, as they cut across the Hall, that by counting Paulus and Presleigh, she was also counting her granddaughter's grandfather and great-grandfather. The realisation gave her an odd feeling that she could not quite identify, but in truth, no matter their relation, she did not want any Death Eaters or their supporters anywhere near her granddaughter. If she had to condemn them to make that happen, so be it.

Eleven, Hermione repeated to herself, taking a deep breath. The second she realised who the last group was, it caught in her throat. Her entire body went rigid, and her steps slowed automatically; she clenched her jaw, wishing to turn back. The Dark Lord could feel her sudden tenseness, though, his lips twitching once more, so off to the Traverses they went.

Eamon Travers was at the centre of the group, a drink in one hand and his wife, Sophronia, holding on to the other as he laughed uproariously with his younger brother. Their mother looked on in a saddened sort of fondness, and Hermione knew that Morgan was wishing her other child was there, too, laughing with them. But Lachlan Travers, who was ordering their house-elf (*Dizzy,* thought Hermione, an ache in her chest, *another of S.P.E.W.s permanent residents*) to refill his drink, had disowned that child.

And in under two years, Eamon would see to it that she was gone for good.

“Travers,” the Dark Lord said, drawing Hermione and himself to a halt.

Lachlan looked up and immediately dipped his head, prompting his family to do the same.

“My Lord,” he said, looking up again, “how are you this evening?”

Hermione felt her insides flare with hatred, flames rising to lick her skin. She stared at Eamon, wondering how a person could be so cruel as to murder their own twin sister in cold blood.

“I am well. Lady Nott and I have been making the rounds —” the Dark Lord glanced down at Hermione as he spoke and, upon seeing the look on her face, fell eerily silent. He followed her gaze, and let out a soft, “*Ah*,” like he had just found the missing piece of a puzzle he had been working on.

“My Lord?” Eamon said, bemused.

“You’ve met Lady Nott, haven’t you, Eamon?”

“Yes, my Lord, just today. I’m afraid we didn’t get a chance to speak much, though.”

Because Hermione had refused to look at him, let alone speak to him, and even though she was looking now, she still did not speak, fearing what might come out of her mouth if she did.

“Is something wrong, Mione?” asked Morgan, peering at her worriedly. “You look quite feverish.”

Hermione was unable to unclench her jaw enough to reply.

He’s going to kill Marlene, and I cannot stop him.

She realised that her nails were digging into the Dark Lord’s arm and hastily slackened her grip, horrified, only to have him drop his hand onto her own, keeping it there.

“I can assure you she’s fine, Mrs Travers. It has been an awfully long day for her, hasn’t it, Lady Nott? You have not been near so many people in quite a while … not since your graduation ceremony, I recall.”

“My mother says I will be ready to sit my N.E.W.T.s by April, my Lord,” Carden piped up, looking hopeful.

Thirteen.

“And you know what awaits you once you have,” said the Dark Lord smoothly. “We shall speak more on that later, young Travers, but right now I must escort Lady Nott back to her son.”

“So soon, my Lord?” said Sophronia, frowning. “Dinner is to be served shortly, is it not?”

“She’s been away from her son long enough, Sophie,” Morgan told her firmly. “Besides, if you’re feeling as ill as you look, Mione, it’d be best if you got some rest. You’ve been busy with your guests all afternoon; you must be very tired.”

She was giving her a reason to leave, Hermione realised distantly, without taking her eyes off Eamon. There was nothing Morgan could do about her sons interacting with the Dark Lord, not when their father was a Death Eater himself, but if there was a chance Hermione could get away, even for a little while, she would try to give it to her. Hermione supposed they were not so different in that regard — in their lack of say.

But at that moment, she could scarcely feel the gratefulness towards Morgan that she would have otherwise; the self-control necessary to suppress her loathing — to restrain herself from pulling another Dolohov — left no room for anything else.

Victoria McKinnon, she thought, once again recalling her past discussion with Narcissa, *Leon McKinnon, Walter McKinnon, Stefan McKinnon, Aisling McKinnon, Marlene McKinnon —*

And an innocent four-year-old boy, who would be too young to understand why five masked wizards thought the world would be better off without him in it, and who might not even know that one of them was his uncle.

Without any spoken order, without even looking away from Hermione and the Dark Lord, Eamon held his now empty tumbler out to Dizzy, the action both lazy and demeaning. When he raised his tumbler to his lips again a moment later to find it still empty, he jerked his head round to snap at her.

“*Are you blind*?”

Dizzy jumped in alarm.

“I’s sorry, Master Eamon,” she said hurriedly, coming forth with the decanter held tightly in both her hands, the skin of them taut over her knuckles, “I’s not seeing —”

“Clearly,” sneered Eamon. He dropped the tumbler, letting it shatter at her bare feet, every bone and joint within them in harsh relief; the shards sliced her skin, and she yelped in pain, springing back only to step on more glass. “Can you see *that*?”

Dizzy gave a jerky nod, her eyes filling with tears.

“Good. Now clean it up.”

Sophronia sighed, looking bored.

“Eamon!” Morgan said, in a hard voice. Lachlan placed a hand on her arm in warning. “This is not the time nor the place. You are disrespecting the Notts —”

Eamon ignored her.

“With your hands, Dizzy.”

“Yes, Master, I’s sorry!” cried Dizzy, falling to her knobbly knees to collect the broken glass, heedless of the blood dripping from her hands and feet. “I’s do better, I’s swear!”

He did not care, did not see her as a living, breathing individual with a mind of her own, with hopes and dreams like everyone else. He did not know Dizzy’s favourite colour was lavender or that she was deathly afraid of the dark, and he did not know that she loved to paint and would spend years studying art under one of S.P.E.W.s volunteer tutors, until she was confident enough to hang her own artwork all around Headquarters. He did not know that she would arrive there so lonely that she would weep every night until Vanky, the house-elf of Atlas Adley, would take the initiative to befriend her, or that she would weep again every time Atlas finally complied to S.P.E.W.s new terms and Vanky had to return home.

It was like a kindling had been added to the fire in Hermione’s chest, sparking and sizzling for a second before erupting with increased fury.

Fuming herself, Morgan drew her wand and aimed it at the floor. “*Evanesco*,” she said, Vanishing the glass. “*Tergeo*,” she added, and the blood, too, was gone.

Eamon turned back to the Dark Lord, laughing lightly and shaking his head in exasperation, as if to say, “House-elves, am I right?”

The Dark Lord did not react right away; first, he looked at Hermione to see if she would.

And she did.

“*Are you deaf*?” she mocked, in a low, furious voice. “Did you not *hear* what your mother said? You are in *my* house, breaking *my* things, making your house-elf bleed on *my* floors. How dare you show my family such blatant disrespect.”

Sophronia and Carden gaped at her. They were likely recalling the sweet-spoken, docile woman whom they had met earlier, and perhaps wondering if this was who had been lurking beneath the surface all along. Her act had thoroughly fooled them, but of course it had. Hermione was a seasoned politician; she could play nice when she wanted to.

She just didn’t want to anymore.

Eamon and Lachlan both looked to the Dark Lord for a clue as to how they were meant to respond to this, but the Dark Lord offered nothing, too busy watching as Hermione carried on scornfully.

“None of us have any interest in watching you discipline your house-elf over something as ridiculous as not getting your drink refilled fast enough to your liking. Did you fail to realise that no one else was laughing? Are blind as well as deaf?”

Even as she drew the attention of the people standing nearest to them, their ears perking up to listen in, no one gave a single retort. And why would they? If the Dark Lord was going to let her talk, then they had no choice but to do the same.

“I suggest you heal Dizzy before she spills any more blood for my own house-elves to mop up.” Hermione raised her chin, letting every bit of heat inside her display itself on her face as she glared at Eamon. “Now, if you would be so kind as to excuse us, I believe *your* master already told you that he was escorting me back to my apartments, before you derailed him.”

Eamon became ghostly pale.

“I hope in the unfortunate event that I am forced to suffer your presence a second time, you’ll have wisened up enough to *remember your place*.”

All five Traverses flinched when the Dark Lord let out a high, delighted laugh and temporarily removed his hand from Hermione’s to give Eamon a pat on the back. He then steered Hermione from the Great Hall, paying no mind to the dozens of people who had been staring at the scene with expressions of shock, fear, and (in Bellatrix’s case) suspicion, and who now dropped into deep bows, several even to their knees, at his exit. No longer were his lips twitching, for they had stretched into an all-out grin.

“You never fail to entertain me, Lady Nott.”

He laughed again, setting her nerves alight as he took her up the staircase on the right side of the long entry hall.

“I’m very fond of you, did you know that?”

Hermione forced herself to swallow, her body wound tight with the remnants of her anger and the return of the anxiety that had held her hostage all afternoon. With each rising step, the letter chafed, going ignored.

“The old fool must have been devastated to have you slip through his fingers. Your anger is like a Four-Point Spell; all I must do is think, ‘*Point Me*.’”

To what?

The Dark Lord kept grinning, the occasional laugh leaving him as they climbed the stairs to the third floor. He opened the doors to the family apartments with a wave of his hand, back to grasping her own before she had the chance to tear herself away from him.

At last, as they started up yet another flight of stairs, his amusement appeared to have settled. He sighed in satisfaction.

“I have one last thing I’d like you to do for me before you hole yourself up in the nursery for the rest of the night. Have no fear,” he added, at her sharp inhale, “it shall only take a minute.”

He steered her right once more, striding through the drawing room without pause, and into the master bedroom.

The last of her anger dissipated instantaneously, and terror took its place. The Dark Lord released her to approach the wardrobe and throw open its doors, meanwhile Hermione stayed in one spot, her eyes darting to the nursery, where Theodore rested, guarded by Dinky and

Crookshanks. When she looked back at the Dark Lord, he had already revealed the entrance to the walk-in closet.

“Come along, Lady Nott,” he said pleasantly, waving her in. She hesitated for a long moment, but in the end, she did as she was told. He stepped in after her, and she flinched when he brushed past, heading straight for the blank stretch of panelled-wall. He stopped, drawing his wand, and, just as Tavaris had done that morning, extended his other hand to her.

Hermione’s heart plummeted.

There were just sixteen days remaining in the year 1979, and she instantly knew, without a sliver of doubt, Regulus’ time was up.

In the span of a breath, her eyes had misted over. Trembling still, she dragged herself over and placed her hand in the Dark Lord’s. She closed her eyes, wishing with all her heart that it did not have to be this way — that she did not have to be accomplice to this — as he sliced open her palm, and smeared her blood on the wall.

He left it bleeding.

Hermione listened to his muffled footsteps on the carpet as he entered the previously occluded room, her tears slipping past her closed eyelids at the sound of a drawer sliding open. It shut a second later, and she heard the rustle of fabric and the *clink* of a chain as he tucked Slytherin’s Locket away in his robes. He came to stand in front of her, close enough that his breath was hot on her face.

“Why so sad, Lady Nott?” the Dark Lord murmured, in a tone of idle curiosity. “It’s only a little blood. You’ve long since grown accustomed to far more pain than that.”

A sob rose in her throat, but she refused to let it escape, cutting off her own supply of oxygen to trap it there. She flinched a second time when he raised his hand to draw his thumb across her cheek, wiping away a few tears, as if it were merely those which stood subject to his curiosity, and not her distress. She felt like prey, keeping still in the hope that her predator would somehow fail to notice her.

The soft *thuds* of Tavaris’ walking-stick sent Hermione stumbling backwards, away from the Dark Lord, her eyes shooting open, and that sob finally tore itself free as the backs of her legs hit the lounge chair behind her, causing her to drop onto it, gasping in pain at the sudden piercing sting on her inner-thigh —

She pressed her hand to it without thinking.

“My Lord?” Tavaris said uncertainly. He stood in front of the wardrobe, peering in at them. His face was free of expression, but his eyes betrayed him, darting between the two of them as if he, too, had recognised Hermione as prey, and the Dark Lord as a predator to them both.

The Dark Lord was not looking at him, though; he was still watching Hermione, his head now tilted slightly in thought.

She held her breath again.

After a moment, his wand rose to point directly at her leg. She realised what he intended to do right before he did it, but it was too late: without speaking, he Summoned her garter belt; it began to slide down her thigh and she pressed her hand down harder, another sob escaping her. It took no more than a few seconds for the garter belt to snap harshly and shoot down the skirt of her gown to soar into the Dark Lord's hand.

The letter fell to her feet.

Tavaris swore under his breath.

With a nearly inhuman sound, Hermione dove for the letter; it flew out of her reach just as her fingertips grazed the parchment.

The Dark Lord clicked his tongue in mocking disapproval. Without letting go of his wand, he tore open the letter. She stayed where she had landed, on her knees, petrified and shaking, too afraid to do anything but watch him read its contents, and await the consequences. Tears continued to stream down her face, not nearly as silent as she tried to make them.

"Well, I cannot claim surprise," the Dark Lord said at length, a minute later, lifting his eyes from the letter. "This is, however, disappointing." He waved the letter. "The seal was still intact, so I presume you have not read it, is that right?"

Hermione shook her head. "*I h—haven't*."

He nodded, studying her closely.

"Who gave you this letter, Mione?"

"It was a Banishing Charm, someone just — they Banished it to my garter, I don't know who, *I swear*!"

"Hmm." The Dark Lord tilted his head again, considering the letter now rather than Hermione. Eventually, he gave a careless shrug of his shoulders. "I suppose it does not matter, does it? It's not as though you'll ever be able to reply."

He moved away from her. When he reached the entrance of the closet, he pushed the letter into Tavaris' chest; Tavaris grabbed it, clenching his jaw.

"Give it to her, burn it, I don't care," the Dark Lord told him. "But do not let this happen again."

"Yes, my Lord," whispered Tavaris.

The Dark Lord held his gaze a minute longer, then brushed past him, out of the wardrobe, and out of sight.

"*T—Tavaris*," Hermione sobbed, looking up at him imploringly.

Tavaris did not move until they heard the doors of the master bedroom shutting behind the Dark Lord, then he climbed through the wardrobe and into the closet, slipping the letter into his robes as he went. He lowered himself onto the lounge chair, propping his walking-stick up against it, and reached for her bloody hand.

"*Please*. I know I can't reply, I *won't*, it's *fine*, I just want to see what she *said* …"

The slice on her palm sewed itself shut as he drew his wand across it, murmuring softly. With another spell, the blood was Syphoned away. He did not release her hand when he was done, but he did put away his wand.

"*Please* …" Hermione repeated, turning herself round to face him. She gripped his hand back tightly. "*Please, just let me read it … just once* …"

"What did he say to you, before I got here?" Tavaris asked finally. "Why did he bring you here in the first place?"

"He —" her breath hitched, and she cried harder, "— *he came for the Locket … He needed me to —*"

"— get in," he finished. "And that's all? Nothing else happened?"

"*N—no*."

He nodded to himself, gazing at their clasped hands.

"Will you — will you let me read it?" Hermione asked.

"It's best if you don't."

"No. No, please —"

"I know it does not feel that way right now," Tavaris continued, as though she had not spoken, "but it is true. You would only be making things harder for yourself, darling."

Sighing wearily, he lifted his free hand to stroke her hair, as if that could possibly soothe her. Still, her head fell forwards against their hands, resting on his knee as she crumbled on the floor, crying harder still.

"*Please, Tavaris … please let me read Lily's letter* …"

Tavaris just kept stroking her hair in silence.

It was difficult to tell how much time passed as they sat there, with only Hermione's sobbing pleas to keep them company, but when he next spoke, her eyes had long since dried and her whole body had sagged in defeat.

"He called you Mione."

She sniffled, staring lifelessly at the burgundy cushion of the chair.

“I know.”

“He never calls you Mione. Always Lady Nott.”

“He said he was fond of me,” she whispered numbly.

“*Fond*.” Tavaris repeated the word as though it were foreign to him, sounding it out slowly, letting it roll across his tongue. He fell silent again for a moment, then said, “That’s what I was afraid of.”

Hermione did not want to think about what he was alluding to; she did not want that name — the name that Ron had given her — to ever be on the Dark Lord’s lips again. It was bad enough that everyone else called her that, bad enough that she had learned to not be bothered by it. She did not think she could cope with him doing it, too.

Even so, she could take comfort in the fact that *Mione* was still a role, just as *Lady Nott* was. It was still a part to be played, and one that gave her a great deal more freedom than she would have had otherwise. *Mione* allowed her to be given the names of those whose identities no one, had they known any better, would have wanted her to have any knowledge of.

Her lips twitched of their own volition, and slowly, they spread into a small smirk. She suddenly felt an inane urge to laugh.

They wish I was only her, she thought savagely, *but I’m not.*

Because she was also Hermione Granger, and the answers that Hermione Granger found, she never failed to share.

And so, later that night, long after all the guests had left, the other Notts had retired, and Tavaris had climbed into bed, she opened her journal to a fresh page, and began a new list. Dipping her quill in ink, she wrote a two-letter title at the very top that she alone would be capable of deciphering: *W.F.*.

Walked Free.

Chapter End Notes

Me: I have the whole chapter already planned, it'll be up by Christmas!
Also me: *does last-minute Christmas shopping, goes on vacation, throws back out, works all week hopped up on painkillers, returns to uni, and promptly gets food poisoning.

Here's what the flowers chosen for the celebration represent: chrysanthemums for Theo (the November flower), aster morning glories for Hermione (the September flower),

gladiolus poppies for Tavaris (the August flower), and calla lilies for new life (and Lily, but the pure-bloods needn't know that).

Felix Rosier and Pippa Macmillan are both characters in Hogwarts Mystery, so I decided to just toss them in here. Who their parents actually are — in cannon — is unknown.

Also, in case anyone is wondering, what Tavaris is implying about Voldemort in that last scene with him and Hermione is not going to happen — this is not a Voldemort/Hermione. It's only a guess, mainly made out of fear. And, although that scene showed quite a bit of closeness, there will be no actual romance between her and Tavaris, either; it was simply an act of, "the devil you know."

Regulus Takes a Bow

Chapter Summary

If he said "help me kill the president"
I'd say he needs medicine
Sick of screaming "let us in"
The wires got the best of him
— Wires, The Neighbourhood

Chapter Notes

CW: implied/referenced infanticide and Major Character Death.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"This is becoming ridiculous, Mione."

Hermione raised her head to look towards the threshold of the nursery from where she sat on a cream-coloured pouffe before the bassinet, one arm stretched over the rim so Theodore could play with her fingers. Dinky stood behind her, rucking up the silk shirt of her pyjamas to rub a Pain-Relieving Salve over her lower-back.

She was grateful that the angle kept Tavaris from seeing her exposed skin, even so little of it, and even if he had seen it countless times before. The matter of how he had seen it, she still avoided thinking about.

"A certain degree of stubbornness builds strength," he said, leaning against the doorframe in lieu of his walking-stick. He, too, was still in his pyjamas, with a black velvet dressing gown thrown overtop; it was a sight that Hermione was still adjusting to, even after four days of living in the same suite. "It breeds autonomy — individuality — but now … now you're just hurting yourself."

"Master Tavaris is being right," Dinky put in, sounding exasperated, as they often were where Hermione was concerned. "Yous just being silly again, Mistress."

"The bed is plenty big enough for the both of us," said Tavaris. "We can even stick Theodore in the middle to serve as a barrier — no man's land."

Stubbornly, Hermione shook her head. She then winced as Dinky began rubbing a particularly sore spot.

“I will wait until the Malfoys are gone,” she said resolutely, “and take one of their rooms.”

“An entire floor below the nursery?”

“Theodore will come with me. He sleeps in my bed at home, anyway, no matter how near his nursery is.”

“Like Dinky says, Mistress Mione is being a silly, stubborn mistress.”

Crookshanks, who had been stretched out by Dinky’s feet either to summon their attention for a belly rub or because he thought the cloud-like carpeting could somehow help him scratch his back, sat up at that. Perhaps he had sensed the insult to Hermione, because, with his bottle-brush tail raised and his squashed-looking nose high in the air, he strutted snootily away to plop himself down by the loveseat instead.

“The Malfoys won’t be leaving for a while longer,” Tavaris said, pushing off the doorframe to limp over to the loveseat. Its cushions were still laden with the thick, floral duvet Hermione had been sleeping with, and he collapsed onto it with a sigh, shifting a little as though to test its comfort level.

Her back was visible to him now, but he only gave it a cursory glance before meeting her gaze again, accustomed to her skin no matter how long it had been since she had last taken a Sleeping Draught.

“Lucius’s training begins today, after breakfast — and of course Regulus and Barty will be here at about noon — but anyway, as such, the Malfoys are staying until the twenty-third. And on the twenty-sixth, when our extended family is set to depart, we will return to the Nott Estate.”

“And the Dark Lord?”

Tavaris shifted again to lay back with his head on the embroidered throw pillow. The loveseat was long enough to fit that and his torso, but his legs dangled off the arm, his slippers grazing the carpet. Hermione had to bend her legs in order to sleep there, but even if she didn’t, they would not have dangled so dramatically. But then again, he was nearly a foot taller than her, nearly as tall as Remus, and about the same height as Ron.

“He’ll come and go, I expect,” Tavaris said after a moment. “That’s what he usually does. A few nights here, a few nights at Malfoy Manor or Raven’s Tower … and then some old estate in Little Hangleton.”

The Riddle House, thought Hermione, but she did not say that. Instead, she wondered aloud, “Raven’s Tower?”

“The Lestranges’. It’s just outside of Kinbrace.”

“Does he have his own room there, like he seems to here, or does he just kick Rodolphus out of his marriage bed for a few nights a month?”

Tavaris chuckled, but it was half-hearted, like he thought the question funny, but could not properly feel his amusement. Again, Crookshanks seemed to sense this, and he leapt onto Tavaris chest. Tavaris winced, but let Crookshanks curl up there, lifting one hand to scratch behind his ears.

"He has a talent for manipulating the mind," he said, seemingly randomly, "did you know that? He can plant false memories without even picking up his wand, force a person to see whatever he wants them to, whatever they fear most … force them to *feel* it, as though it were real … I think he punishes Edmund that way sometimes … forces him to see the end of his bloodline, make him fear Bellatrix and Rodolphus will never conceive an heir to continue it …"

"I don't have to guess what sort of memories he'd force on Rodolphus, then," said Hermione.

"Yes," said Tavaris quietly.

"Goppy tells Dinky the Dark Lord stays at Nottingham Hall at least one night a week," Dinky informed them. "He is being in the library most, Goppy says, and sometimes the ritual grounds, sometimes the lab. He doesn't be liking the nata—toe—rum."

Hermione smiled humourlessly. "Maybe he just doesn't know how to swim," she said unthinkingly. "I doubt he learned at the orphanage."

Tavaris' head jerked towards her, his eyes narrowed.

"How do you know about that?"

They all already suspected that Professor Dumbledore had been teaching her about the Dark Lord due to the intel they had received concerning her meetings with him, so Hermione didn't see a reason to play dumb. Knowing the location of the Riddle house would leave them under the impression that Professor Dumbledore knew a lot more about the Dark Lord than he should have, but knowledge of Wool's Orphanage was expected — safe.

"Professor Dumbledore told me."

With a short, considering hum, Tavaris laid his head back down on the pillow and returned to petting Crookshanks.

"I suppose that fits."

Hermione went back to watching Theodore. He was sucking on her forefinger now, drooling all over her knuckles. Blinking, he looked up, and his bottom-of-the-ocean-blue eyes widened as though they needed to be as big as possible in order to sufficiently focus his attention on her.

"You're awfully slobbery this morning, aren't you?" she said, half-amused and half-fond. "You must be hungry if you enjoy the taste of my finger so much. I doubt it's particularly delicious."

“When you’re done there, Dinky,” said Tavaris, “find that pack of dummies the Macmillans gave us.”

“Get the blue one,” added Hermione. “He likes blue.”

“How do you figure?”

She shrugged.

“He’s yet to sick up on any of my blue stuff.”

Tavaris huffed a small laugh, then said, “I’ll have to get you more blue things for Christmas, in that case.”

“You best not be expecting any gifts under the tree from me.”

“Not to worry. Seeing everyone’s shocked faces the other night as you went about biting their heads off was all the holiday joy I require.”

Hermione snorted softly, her lips spreading into a grin.

“Esther’s face in particular was a sight to behold.”

“Yes, I suspect she’ll be wary of showing her face in public for a while. She certainly won’t be invited into *our* home again anytime soon.”

The heat of the previously cool salve began to warm her back, soothing her aching muscles. Dinky stepped back, letting her shirt fall; it clung to her skin.

“Dinky is done,” they announced. “I fetches Master Theodore’s new dummy now.”

“Thank you, Dinky,” said Hermione, just before they disappeared. She straightened up, gently withdrawing her fingers from Theodore’s grasp; he whined at the loss. “All right, my love, I hear you. Out, Tavaris, I need to feed him now,” she added.

Thankfully, Tavaris did not argue, although he did grumble a bit. It took a minute for him to get up from the loveseat, first prompting Crookshanks off his chest and then grimacing as he moved his bad leg, but he eventually left her to her privacy, shutting the nursery door behind himself.

Half an hour later, they were sharing breakfast with the Malfoys in the morning room downstairs. Hermione ate one-handed, Theodore in her left arm and sucking contentedly on his new dummy. She eyed the copies of the *Prophet* that Tavaris, Abraxas, and Lucius were each perusing with the help of the free hands they so fortunately had available to them.

“Put the paper down and eat your sausages, Lucius,” Evangeline said authoritatively, as she stirred a spoonful of sugar into her tea. “You’ll need your energy for today.”

Her own plate had nothing but fruit and a handful of potatoes on it.

“Just a moment, Mother …” Lucius murmured distractedly. His brow furrowed as he scanned whatever article he was on.

Narcissa leaned over to peer at it curiously; her eyes immediately widened, her mouth falling open with a small gasp.

“What is it?” asked Hermione.

A moment passed before Narcissa was able to find her voice.

“A baby — a newborn baby went missing from St Mungo’s yesterday morning,” she said in a horrified voice.

“*Missing*?” exclaimed both Hermione and Evangeline at once. Hermione clutched Theodore tighter.

“It says —” Narcissa squinted at the *Prophet*, and, reluctantly, Lucius shifted it to make it easier for her to read, “— it says that —” her voice fell flat, as did her expression, “— his mother is a Muggle-born.”

Chills ran down Hermione’s arms. Fearing she already knew the answer, she asked, “Does it mention who her Healer was?”

Narcissa looked up, her face paler than usual.

“It was Hatley.”

“Hatley Gibbon?” said Evangeline, her eyebrows shooting halfway up her forehead. “My goodness, she must be feeling so torn up right now, the poor thing. Even if she was forced to deliver the child of a *Muggle-born*, that was still a child that she deliv—” She broke off, cottoning on to the silence of all three of their husbands.

Abraxas cleared his throat awkwardly, reaching for his cup of tea.

“Abraxas?” said Evangeline. “Lucius?”

Lucius stared determinedly at the *Prophet*.

The dummy fell out of Theodore’s mouth as the tension, like it normally did, made him whimper. Tavaris picked the dummy up from where it had fallen on Hermione’s lap and gave it back to him, then returned to his paper.

“Has this happened before?” Hermione asked him. “To the babies of other Muggle-borns?”

Tavaris did not answer.

“There have been still-borns …” Evangeline said slowly, “and in the last five years or so we’ve seen a rise in miscarriages … but I’d thought … Well, it was all Muggle-borns, wasn’t it? I assumed it must’ve had something to do with their blood.”

“More likely it had to do with their Healer,” said Hermione darkly. She discarded her fork on her still-full plate, feeling sick, and pulled Theodore up to lay his head on her chest, one of her hands rubbing his back, more to soothe herself than him.

Fourteen.

The only sign of Evangeline’s discomfort was her fingers drumming upon the surface of the round table — round, solely in shape. After a few seconds, she seemed to pull herself together, and snapped at Lucius to eat his sausages again.

Narcissa did not put down her fork; it slipped from her grasp to land with a clatter on her plate as she brought her hand up to cover her mouth. With her other hand pressed against her still-flat stomach, she shoved her chair back and ran from the room. Evangeline hastened after her.

The colour did not return to Narcissa’s face for the rest of the day. She, Hermione, and Evangeline spent most of it decorating the Great Hall for Christmas with the Nott witches, whilst Delany darted around their legs and tried to teach Theodore how to put toys in his mouth. The tree that Theomund and Terric had gotten (chopped down in the forest like the earth they walked was not the same one their descendants would have to) was so large that, had the Hall not been two-stories tall, it would not have fit.

Without a wand, Hermione could not do much in the way of decorating, so for the most part, she remained on the camel-back sofa, puzzling out the menus for Christmas Eve dinner, the following morning’s formal brunch, and the feast that would take place in the evening. Making food selections was not a very enjoyable task when she was still feeling ill with the knowledge that her son had been delivered by a Death Eater.

Because Theodore, too, was the half-blood child of a Muggle-born, even if the only people who knew it were Professor Dumbledore and herself. In another scenario, it could have been Theodore who had gone missing, stolen right under her nose within hours of his birth to be — what? Killed? Left to die out in the cold, alone in the rubbish-filled dumpster of a deserted alleyway, crying out for a mother who would never find him in time?

Perhaps Healer Gibbon would have given Hermione an intentionally botched Prenatal Potion that triggered a miscarriage, or caused Theodore to be born so terrifyingly still, his heart having stopped before he had even left the womb. Hermione remembered dutifully taking every potion she had been prescribed, thinking exclusively of Theodore, just as she had with all the potions she had forced down while he was being conceived.

A Death Eater delivered my son, she thought again, and again, and again, until the quill in her hand began to shake and she was forced to set it aside.

Taking a deep, purposeful breath, she picked Theodore up from where he had laid on the cushion next in a nest made up of the pale-yellow blanket they had received from the Rosiers. A carefully positioned bolster pillow had been keeping him from the edge of the sofa, even though she knew it would be another three months before he began rolling over; its true purpose there was to soothe her paranoia — that was what Ron used to say, when she did the same for Rose and Hugo.

“Non, m’Lady!” Delany complained, kneeling between the sofa and the coffee table. Toys, both his and Theodore’s, littered the floor around him. “Nous parlions de *L’oiseau et la Baleine*!”

Hermione leaned back and settled Theodore on her chest, frowning.

“The bird and the … shark?”

“Whale,” said Delany, unimpressed. “Maman le lit avant que je m’endorme. Ta maman l'a lu?”

“Oh … Non. My mother never read it to me.” She glanced down at Theodore, who was again sucking on his dummy, then back at Delany, thoughtful. “I don’t suppose *you* would like to?”

He scrunched his face up, adorably, but could not seem to find the right words.

“Vous — ah — lire à moi?” Hermione realised that she should probably brush up on her French.

Delany sagged in disappointment. He looked behind him to where his mother stood; Ivette appeared to be arguing with Narcissa in French about whether to use gold or silver tinsel for the tree, neither one spotting Crookshanks as he steadily stole mouthfuls of both and hid them behind the bar. The latter woman, Hermione knew from Draco, spoke French much more fluently than herself due to the sizable portion of Rosiers who resided in France.

And because these high-society people seemed to think that any child who wasn’t bilingual was a child who was undisciplined.

A small hand patted her knee to get her attention, and Hermione looked down at Delany, who was still sat on the floor. With one more glance behind him to ensure his mother wasn’t looking, he leaned in conspiratorially, and whispered, “*L’Oiseau et la Baleine* est le cadeau de Noël de Théodore, m’Lady!”

“You got Theodore the book for Christmas?” Hermione clarified, and he nodded. “Well, in that case —” At his frown, she stopped herself, then tried again. “Tu peux m'aider — er — à le lui lire après le repas de Noël?”

Delany gave her a cheeky grin almost too big for his face and began to clap his hands in excitement. He then leapt into a highly enthusiastic tirade about all his favourite parts of the story, of which she understood roughly two-thirds.

Hermione hoped there would be an English-to-French dictionary underneath the tree for her.

“Faites-vous la lecture à Théodore avant le coucher?”

“Do I —? Oh. Non, je ne peux pas. I don’t. But I do sing to him sometimes. Je chante.”

With great eagerness, Delany clambered onto the sofa and wiggled himself right up against her side. He gazed up at her expectantly.

“Chantez!”

Letting out a sigh, Hermione lifted her arm to wrap it around him, forcing him to stop wiggling, and slumped further to keep Theodore steady without the aid of a second hand.

And then she began to sing.

“*Girls in white dresses with blue satin sashes*

Snowflakes that stay on my nose and eyelashes

Silver white winters that melt into springs

These are a few of my favourite things…”

The end of the song was met with a demand of, “Encore, encore!” Hesitating, she shot a look of dread at the unfinished menus on the coffee table; she still doubted that her stomach would be able to handle their completion.

And so, it was with another sigh that she began again.

Delany fell asleep halfway through the fifth encore, his thumb firmly in his mouth.

“You’re good with him,” Narcissa remarked softly, so as not to wake him. She had come to stand a metre away from them and would likely be mortified to know that there was a string of silver tinsel caught in her hair. “Both of them.”

Hermione forced her lips to form a smile. “My old boyfriend, Bilius, had two younger siblings — a girl and a boy. I suppose I got some practice with them.” An image of those two red-headed children swam to the forefront of her mind, and her smile turned genuine, albeit rather sad. “I … I loved them very much. I loved them like they were my own.”

When Narcissa sat down on her other side, watching her attentively, Hermione scarcely noticed, for her eyes had drifted to gaze at something in the distance that she could not actually see, and she found herself wondering if Theodore would ever be given the opportunity, or would ever take it if he were, to meet his brother and sister.

Because that was who Rose and Hugo were, Hermione took in, with no small amount of amazement: his siblings. And Ron, his step-father. Would Theodore be willing to accept that?

Would he be willing to accept her?

“They’re Muggles … aren’t they?”

She swallowed painfully, blinking away a few tears.

“Yes,” she lied. “They’re Muggles.”

“Perhaps … perhaps you might allow me to practise with Theodore, as you did with them?” Narcissa asked tentatively.

An unpleasant noise and an equally unpleasant smell effectively broke the fragility of the moment. With a watery laugh, Hermione looked back at Narcissa.

“Sure. Would you like to start now?”

Narcissa wrinkled her nose in answer.

A couple of minutes later, Hermione was making her way up to the family apartments with Theodore, and Narcissa had been left behind on the sofa, trying her hardest to not be bothered by the puddle of drool steadily growing in her lap, courtesy of a still-sleeping Delany.

Hermione panted slightly as she climbed, positively loathing each step that she had to take. Her back, too, did not appreciate the trek. No complaint would ever leave her lips, however, for she knew it would only lead to being told to let Dinky handle everything for her, and she downright refused to leave the minding of her own son to someone else. Unless, of course, they were preoccupied with guests, in which case she could justify it by pretending Dinky was a paid babysitter.

Silly, stubborn mistress.

Just as she reached the third floor, huffing in exhaustion, the doors to the library swung open, and out walked Lucius, Tavaris, and all the other Nott men. Their voices, loud, jubilant, and full of mirth, overlapped each other and seemed to bounce off the walls, like they were a group of rowdy young men on their way out of a bar. She stopped at the top of the stairs, eyeing them all in exasperation.

“Ah, darling!” Tavaris said brightly when he spotted her. He came over to tickle Theodore’s side gently, making him gurgle, his dummy falling out of his mouth to land on the floor. “We were just about to take Lucius down to the duelling room.”

Hermione had no idea that one existed.

“On to the practical portion of today’s lesson, then?” she asked, crouching to retrieve the fallen dummy.

“Indeed, my Lady,” said Rawdon, grinning. “It is time to try zee curses we are teaching,” he added, clapping Lucius on the back.

Lucius, too, was grinning.

“It’ll be good to finally put them to use.”

“Oho, you are not there yet!” bellowed Theomund, laughing. “You try first on small animal, then we see.”

Tavaris sniggered above Hermione’s head as she straightened back up, leaning at her side with one hand on the bannister. His closeness seemed to distract Theodore from both his lost dummy and the undoubtedly uncomfortable state of his nappy; he was staring fixedly at Tavaris over her shoulder as he chewed mindlessly on a piece of her hair. Absently, she freed the strand from his mouth.

“We will ‘ave elf bring us best bottle from Tavi’s cellar,” said Terric, and she felt her eyebrows shoot up at the nickname. “Curses always fly faster when you ‘ave drink. You must trust me, Malfoy — always, *always*.”

“C'est juste un ivrogne,” Barnett told Hermione, and, outraged, Terric exclaimed, “*You* are zee drunk, Froschfesser!”

“Embrassez mon cul de Français, Terric!”

“I do not know what you are saying — all sounds like Gobbledegook.”

“Do you want me to repeat myself in a language you can compre’end? *Kiss — my — French — ass*!”

“Barnett. Stop playing French,” said Rawdon, unimpressed. “You were born in Assos.”

No one listened to him.

“You will dust floor with ‘im, ja?” Terric said, looking at Lucius as he jerked his thumb towards Barnett. “It is easy, I promise you. The French are weak duellers.”

“There is good saying I know,” Theomund told Lucius, struggling to speak through his mirth: “‘Französische Panzer haben Rückspiegel, damit sie den Feind beim Rückzug sehen können.’ French tanks ‘ave their mirrors on the backside —” he practically howled, “— *so they can see the enemy upon retreat*!”

“That’s a Muggle saying, Theomund,” Hermione interjected, and all six men became very still, very quickly. Her eyebrows rose impossibly higher. “About a *Muggle war*.”

After a second, Rawdon’s lips curled into a smirk, making his goatee twitch. His eyes gleaming wickedly, he turned his head gradually towards his brother-in-law (*and,* she grimaced, *cousin*).

“You are seeing her still, ja? You are seeing your Mudblood mistress?”

The blood drained from Theomund’s wizened face.

“*Oh … oho*, verabschiede dich von deinen Hoden. I am telling Tate.” And with that, Rawdon took off down the stairs at a speed no man in their seventies should be capable of, cackling madly as he went.

Theomund struggled after him in a panic.

“You *know* Ida is Unterstaatssekretär bei der Ministerin für Magie! She is giving me information for the Dark Lord!”

Fifteen.

“My father will now ‘ave ‘is testicles removed,” Terric told Lucius, in a voice that implied great wisdom. “Your training will begin by watching zis.”

Tavaris brushed the rest of Hermione's hair out of Theodore's reach, dropped a kiss to the tops of both their heads, and said, "See you at dinner, darling," before he and Barnett followed Terric and Lucius down the stairs.

"Delany had better be out of that room before first blood!" Hermione shouted over the bannister, and Theodore yelled nonsensically, which she took as his way of backing her up.

"*Bordel de merde*!" Barnett exclaimed, now taking the steps two at a time.

Shaking her head in disbelief, Hermione turned back round, and was startled to see Abraxas sitting on the chair outside the library doors, leisurely drawing his walking-stick back and forth across the floor.

"You're looking confident," she said sarcastically.

Abraxas got up with a short sigh and seemed to force himself in the direction of the stairs. He halted a few feet away from her and looked Theodore over.

"I cannot say I missed that smell."

"As if you've ever changed a nappy, Abraxas."

"That's true enough. It wasn't exactly my job to do so, after all." Abraxas stayed looking at Theodore, his voice tired and fond at the same time. "You know, when Lucius was a boy, he used to steal my Dark Arts books and read them under the covers by the light of his wand when he was supposed to be sleeping … No matter how violent or gory the content got, he never suffered a single nightmare as far as I'm aware … He used to listen to tales of raids and revels with the most — the most *enraptured* look on his face …

"He's still like that. He has his head full of *so many ideas* … so many *strategies* and *political plots* that even the Dark Lord thinks are clever … But, Mione —" he lifted his gaze to meet her own, and the look in his eyes somehow made him appear years older than he truly was, "— when faced with the real thing … when he's got someone else's wand in his face and they have no intention of stopping, or there's a person bleeding out in front of him and he's just been asked to finish them off … my son's not capable of shit." *And it terrifies me,* he did not say.

Hermione was left deep in thought when Abraxas started down the stairs after the others, carrying his walking-stick in a way that Tavaris could not — horizontally, so as not to impede his descent. Although his fear of the likelihood of his son's failure was not presently ungrounded, she knew that, in time, Abraxas would find that there were no worries to be had, because the Lucius of the future would have no trouble bringing those ideas of his to life.

She had come to discover how true this was a long time ago, once she had gotten old enough to understand Lucius' motives behind slipping Tom Riddle's Diary into Ginny's cauldron that day at Flourish and Blotts.

In 1992, Arthur Weasley had proposed the enactment of a Muggle Protection Act, leading to an immediate rise in Ministry raids on the homes of those who were suspected to have illegal

Dark artefacts in their possession — the homes of people like the Malfoys. In retaliation, Lucius had given Riddle's Diary to an unsuspecting first-year student, thinking that if they were caught murdering their Muggle-born classmates, the Bill that Arthur had proposed would fail to pass, putting a stop to the raids. And who better to target than Arthur's own daughter?

In 1979, no matter how many strategies and political plots he thought up, Lucius still vomited at the sight of the mangled bodies his brethren left in their wake. There was no feasible way that he would be able to stomach inciting the murders of numerous children, even Muggle-borns, nor would he be able to find it within himself to set an innocent eleven-year-old girl up for murder.

For the rest of the morning, Hermione could not help but wonder how and when that version of him would surface. His training had only just commenced, so, the question was: to what lengths would Abraxas and Tavaris go to ensure that Lucius became the follower the Dark Lord wanted him to be?

Only once they were all sitting down for lunch did she release this question from her thoughts.

Goppy was still trying to get the bloodstains out of the sofa cushions in the Great Hall. Thankfully, Narcissa and Ivette had whisked Delany away before Tate had cursed off the part of her husband's anatomy responsible for the conception of their son. The two of them were now at St Mungo's Hospital having it reattached, due to Aunt Adalaide's loud and unbending decree of, "You make mess, *you clean mess*!"

Hermione was beginning to think she was married to the sanest of the Nott men, and that was truly horrifying.

One might assume that she would be accustomed to chaotic family dynamics by now, considering she had spent two decades with a bunch of Weasleys and Potters for in-laws. The Potters' annual New Year's Eve party, after all, had required both an on-call Healer (Hannah Abbott) and a member of the Official Fire Broomgade (Seamus Finnigan), not to mention a half-dozen of Harry's most trusted Aurors. Being exposed to that level of chaos had certainly sent Dudley Dursley and his wife Patty running for the hills — which was understandable, seeing as their sons, Hudson and Archer, had nearly gotten trampled on by Stephen, the Hippogriff that Rolf Scamander had brought that year. They were lucky to have not been present the following year, when George had set the whole place ablaze with brand-new, yet-to-be-tested fireworks from Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes.

The Notts provided a very different sort of chaos, though — what with casually castrating one another in the middle of the Great Hall — and Hermione could hardly wait for them to all be gone.

Based on the way he was looking at his steak and kidney pie, Lucius agreed. His spoon shook every time he tried to raise it. Beside him, Narcissa was chatting with Terric's wife, Harolyn, and their daughter, Gisela, and she was wearing the same smile she had worn prior to falling pregnant with Draco — one that was slight, gentle, and, unfortunately, not real.

The Nott men who weren't currently in hospital were sharing their first impressions of Lucius' duelling skills. They did not go about it kindly.

"— and I say, 'Good, now you will feed to Terric,' and 'is eyes grow as big as Galleons, Mama! Like zis —" Rawdon widened his eyes dramatically, his mouth stretched open as though in a silent scream. The expression was reminiscent of that of Peter when Filch had taken away the Marauder's Map.

Aunt Adalaide gave Rawdon an unimpressed look from across the table, where she sat on Hermione's left, two seats down from Tavaris.

"You make your nephew eat rat; I will tell Oof to serve you nothing else for a month."

"Ha!" Terric exclaimed triumphantly, pointing at Rawdon with his knife. "Deine Mama wird dich mit deiner Cousine ins Krankenhaus schicken."

"Mein Cousin? Hast du deinen Papa gemeint?"

"Ignore zem, Malfoy, your son did well," Barnett reassured Abraxas, which was ruined when he added blithely, "many wizards do not know where to stick it zee first time."

"Barnett!" Ivette snapped. She covered Delany's ears with her hands. Evidently, sex jokes crossed a line, whilst his grandfather trying to convince someone to feed his cousin a rat did not.

"Maman!" Delany whinged, trying to bat her hands away.

"Save your jokes for when the women aren't around, Barnett," said Tavaris, as he cut himself another bite of pie. "Telling them now won't do you any favours."

"I apologise for my brother," Odelyn told them all. "He has no sense of when to keep his mouth shut."

"I 'ear no lies," said Ivette coolly.

Barnett ignored them.

"Do you wish for me to save my jokes for when zee women are gone," he asked Tavaris knowingly, "or when your leettle wife is?"

Potentia 'i Silentio, thought Hermione, rolling her eyes. *Only they never shut up.* The one time she had witnessed the visiting Notts achieve even a modicum of silence was at Saturday's party; they had spent both portions of it quietly observing from the side-lines in a way that was — as had been claimed by Theomund Nott I — quite unsettling. *Like a murder of crows, hovering in anticipation as they waited for the first body to drop — Orion's, probably.*

She stabbed a piece of her pie with her fork, using a bit more force than was strictly necessary. With Theodore already fed and tucked away in the nursery with Dinky and

Crookshanks, her other hand felt bereft. It rested on the arm of her chair at the long table of the informal dining room, limp, as if it were bored.

“Second one,” said Rawdon decisively. “‘E did not like the jokes this morning, I am thinking. Our Lady is sensitive. Delicate, like flower.”

“I understand what you say, Baba,” said Barnett, his eyes crawling over Hermione like a thousand ravenous insects. It was the first time in roughly five months that she had been able to wear a dress that was form-fitting, and she instantly regretted it. “Et je parie qu'elle a le goût du miel.”

He is so lucky I don’t have a wand.

Red-faced with anger, Ivette tossed her napkin onto her plate and stood from the table.

“I ‘ope you like sleeping on zee floor!” she hissed, hoisting a bewildered and upset Delany up into her arms. With a final glare at her husband, she stormed out of the room.

“Crétin,” spat Odelyn, and then she, too, tossed her napkin down and left. Hermione wondered if she had learned French just to insult her older brother in his preferred language.

As the doors slammed shut behind Odelyn, Aunt Adalaide let out a long sigh.

“We are always having our most civilised meals ‘ere, Tavaris.”

Hermione didn’t think she was being sarcastic.

As though hoping to find the translation of Barnett’s comment on her face, Evangeline peered curiously at Narcissa, who cleared her throat delicately and set her cutlery on her plate, pointing to four o’clock. A second later, Dobby appeared to take away her unfinished meal. Hermione watched him vanish with a *pop*, focusing on drawing an even breath — a strategy she had been implementing each time she saw him. She then glanced at Tavaris.

He had not spoken since Barnett’s suggestion that she couldn’t handle being exposed to his filthy jokes. Tavaris, she suspected, took it as a great insult to his character when someone implied he had married a weak wife.

“Nobody likes when I talk,” Barnett muttered irritably.

“Not even a little,” Gisela confirmed.

“I grow more and more ashamed every time I see you,” said his mother, Aleena. She wrinkled her nose in disgust. “Den se megálosa gia na eísai diestramménos.”

“*Mama*! I am not a p—!”

“So *now* you speak Greek!” bellowed Rawdon.

“Eímai Gállos!”

"'I'm French,' he says," mocked Aleena scornfully, before adding in a shout, "*in Greek*!"

"Lady Mione est assez bonne pour être mangée et je le dirai dans la langue que je veux!"

"I am thinking they speak only zee truth when they agree our Lady is sensitive," Terric interrupted, very matter-of-factly, effectively and unfortunately steering the conversation back on course. He gestured to Hermione's plate. "Elf *does* 'ave to cut up food for 'er."

"That's actually because she hasn't been allowed knives since she stabbed Antonin Dolohov," said Tavaris abruptly.

At last, Hermione thought blissfully, *silence.* Putting down her fork, she smiled at the gobsmacked faces of the other Nott men and crept her fingers along the table, purposely inching them closer to Tavaris' knife.

"Antonin?" Terric repeated incredulously, his eyes tracking the movement.

"Is he a friend of yours, Terric?" she asked casually. Tavaris let her fingertips graze the silverware before he moved it out of reach, and she retracted her hand, smiling still. "You wouldn't *believe* how loud he screamed."

Terric gulped.

"The Dark Lord is giving us same task, time to time."

Sixteen.

Barnett appeared unconcerned. "Our Lady must know better now, I think. Zee Dark Lord gave harsh punishment, no?"

"Oh, yes," said Hermione, mockingly grave. "He visited me while I was on bed rest and told me very sternly to try to avoid stabbing any more Death Eaters."

Harolyn gazed down at her own knife in contemplation, while Aleena's head jerked forwards like she needed Hermione to repeat herself before accepting that she had heard correctly. Barnett and Terric merely stared in disbelief.

"No stabbing more Death Eaters," Rawdon reminded the latter two, with a short, decided nod, "so there is no worry for us."

Eighteen.

Appearing to have perked up, Abraxas let out a low, condescending chuckle. He gave Rawdon a pitying pat on the shoulder, as if to say, "Whatever helps you sleep at night."

Just then, there was another *pop* of Apparation, and Goppy appeared before them to announce, "Young Messrs Black and Crouch be waiting in the library, Master Tavaris."

Hermione's amusement died a quick death.

*

That afternoon, the women took their tea — and coffee — in the first-floor drawing room, located on the west side of the Hall and beside the lady's study. The drawing room was much lighter and softer in appearance than any other seating area Hermione had yet seen at Nottingham Hall, with floor-length windows on either side of a marble fireplace, white wooden furniture, and powder-blue upholstery. It was somewhat of a more delicate and sophisticated version of the lady's parlour back at the Nott Estate, and it seemed to be used similarly.

Whilst their husbands were off either traumatising Lucius in the duelling room or tutoring Regulus and Barty in the library, the Nott and Malfoy women all gathered to sip too-sweet tea or rich-smelling coffee and pretend to nibble at the biscuits that had been served with it.

Hermione was between Narcissa and Evangeline on a periwinkle cabriole sofa, ignoring the whispering of Aleena, Harolyn, Gisela, Odelyn, and Ivette on the sofa opposite. Considering the looks of mingled awe and apprehension that the latter two sent her way, she assumed they were being filled in on the revelation they had missed at lunch. The only one who did not seem to care was Aunt Adalaide, who was perched on a plush armchair by the fire, delighting in what may have been her fourth cup of black coffee and lecturing Delany on how to eat one biscuit at a time rather than as many as he could fit in his mouth.

Only Hermione's forcefully mounting dread kept her indignance at this all from spilling over. Years, she had spent, hustling from conference room after conference room and courtroom after courtroom, surrounded mainly by men who were infatuated with the sounds of their own voices, until it was her voice that was the most commanding — the most respected. She had been the one sitting at the head of the table, and she had been the one holding the gavel.

And here she was now, reduced to lazing about with other housewives whilst their husbands entertained themselves with a healthy combination of work and play. Hermione felt the loss keenly, most days. She had the potential for far more than this, and everyone knew it, yet here she was still, because this was where she was supposed to be.

Today, though, Hermione's mind had drifted away from all of that, her indignance carried off into the distance to float amongst the rough waves of her sea of memories.

Fifteen days. She did her best to keep the feelings that accompanied this thought from showing on her face. *There are fifteen days left in nineteen-seventy-nine.*

The shifting of the cushion beneath her made her turn her head, smoothing her thumb gently over Theodore's head of fine, dark hair as he rested in her arms, again soothing herself rather than him. He was uniquely calm for two-months old, far calmer than Rose had been, in any case, although that wasn't too spectacular of an accomplishment; however, as if he had a sixth sense for it, once tension rose thickly in the air, that calm swiftly fled him. Hermione tried to keep her shoulders relaxed and her breathing steady, hoping that he would fail to sense it clinging to her every nerve.

Narcissa had scooted closer on the sofa, looking like she had a question but was wary of voicing it. No surprise there; none of them were supposed to ask questions. Hermione waited,

though, and eventually, Narcissa whispered, “What does he teach them, Tavaris?”

On Hermione’s other side, Evangeline leaned in intently.

“You know,” Narcissa said, still whispering. She seemed to have cottoned on to this now, Hermione being privy to things that others were not. “I know you do. Abraxas said you’ve observed their lessons before.”

“Are you asking what he teaches Regulus and Barty, or what he teaches Lucius?” asked Hermione. “Because I can’t speak for the latter.”

“You can make an educated guess, though,” said Evangeline, looking hopeful.

Hermione sighed. She took a sip of her tea, then set it down with its saucer on the coffee table — slowly, to keep from jostling Theodore.

“Everyone is instructed on different things,” she began after a moment, her voice low. “They all have their own areas in which the Dark Lord wishes for them to be proficient. For Rabastan, Evan, Angus, and Gaspar, this means duelling. Tavaris helps them with their technique and … teaches them new curses that tend to crop up in the *Prophet* within the following month. I expect they’ll be seeing more action than the others.”

Narcissa and Evangeline appeared to hang on to her every word, which was an odd turn of events, to be frank.

“Snape, despite his brewing skills, is instructed on spell-creation. Of course, in his own time, he’s apprenticing under a Potions Master — Arsenius Jigger, in fact — but I suspect the Dark Lord is currently more interested in the innovation of new spells than he is in having another brewer on hand. Perhaps he thinks Snape’s potion-making expertise is already being sufficiently handled, though. Tavaris does introduce a new potion to him sometimes, but the sort that Snape can hardly learn elsewhere.

“As for Bellatrix … She visits at the end of each month to practise what the Dark Lord has already taught her himself. It consists mostly of duelling-centred spellwork, I believe.”

Hermione heard the extremely rare *clink* of Narcissa’s teacup hitting its saucer, but tactfully pretended not to.

“In the case of Regulus and Barty, however,” she continued in the same undertone, “the focus is on politics. The plan is for them to work towards infiltrating the Ministry of Magic. Barty, for instance, once he’s graduated, will start at whatever low-level position his father arranges for him and serve as the Dark Lord’s eyes and ears within the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Regulus …” She trailed off, biting the inside of her cheek. She watched the thin tendrils of steam rising off the surface of her tea begin to dissipate as it steadily cooled.

“Regulus?” Narcissa prompted.

Hermione could not look at her.

“The Dark Lord has decided,” she said haltingly, each word like pulling teeth, “that Regulus would prove … *most useful* … if he were to keep to the Wizengamot and use his connections as the new Lord Black to … further the cause.”

Neither Evangeline nor Narcissa spoke for a while, likely absorbing this information.

“Is he doing well?” the latter asked eventually. “Is Regulus … pleasing the Dark Lord with his progress?”

Still, Hermione did not look at her. Narcissa would see the lie on her face, now that she knew to look for it: a lie of deception, but a lie, nonetheless.

“Yes. I believe he is.”

Narcissa released a sigh of relief that was barely audible.

“Good,” she murmured. “That is good.”

Hermione gave a small nod. She could feel her mask beginning to crack. Theodore squirmed slightly in her arms, scrunching his face up. Clearing her throat, she said, “Do excuse me for a minute, I need to powder my nose. Would you mind holding Theodore until I return?”

At once, Narcissa put aside her tea to take Theodore. He fussed a bit more at the transfer, but settled quickly, perhaps recognising the scent of her perfume. It was the same one that Hermione wore, ever since it had become Narcissa’s responsibility to select the beauty products she was provided.

“I’ll be back shortly,” Hermione said, and, too afraid to spare even a backward glance, lest Narcissa saw through her, she left the drawing room —

And promptly walked straight into Regulus, who had been standing against the wall outside the doors.

Her heart did a flip, like she had missed a step going down the stairs; she backed up immediately, pressing a hand to her chest.

“My goodness, Regulus,” she said breathlessly, forcing herself to smile, “you frightened me. I didn’t see you there.”

Regulus nodded dismissively. His eyes darted over the bannister on his right, down at the Great Hall, empty of people, to the drawing-room doors, as if to ensure they had shut properly, and then over his shoulder, through the arch that opened into the hall of stairwells. Finally, the lack of eavesdroppers confirmed, his eyes returned to Hermione.

“Might I speak to you for a minute?” he asked, and his voice was far too quiet. Even quieter, he added, “In private.”

Hermione gave up on hiding her unease, or perhaps it had overpowered her, wiping off her pitiful excuse for a smile. She let her hand fall to her side and peered about for a place to go;

her palms had already grown sweaty enough to slacken her grip on the doorknob when she proceeded to lead him into the lady's study.

It was about a third of the size of the drawing room and had a single window hidden behind thick, floral curtains. A dainty-looking desk sat in the corner, next to an abysmally stocked bookshelf, and on the other side of the room was a lilac loveseat, situated opposite a velvet armchair and an ottoman too low for anyone remotely long-legged to comfortably perch on.

Hermione stopped at the centre of the room and spun round to face Regulus, who had his wand drawn and aimed at the door.

"*Colloportus*," he murmured under his breath. "*Muffliato*." Spells cast, he tucked his wand back into the pocket of his robes, the dark, inky colour of which looked far from sinister: the black was a symbol of grief; worn for his father, it undoubtedly was, but Orion might not have been whom Regulus was truly mourning that day.

Very slowly, Regulus faced her. In the span of a second, his cool, grey eyes, lined with sleepless circles yet still so much like his brother's, went from cautiously observant to hauntingly resolute.

He doesn't have fifteen days, Hermione realised, *and he knows it.*

"What was it you wished to speak to me about?" she asked. She was aware that she should be acting suspicious, questioning why he had left his lesson to seek her out or why he had felt the need to ward the door once he had, but all she could do at that moment was focus on not letting her voice shake when she spoke.

"I …" Regulus took a deep breath and managed to make it look small, betrayed only by his expanding chest. He straightened his shoulders, standing taller. "I have a favour to ask."

"A favour?" she repeated, in a too-high voice.

He nodded.

"What sort of favour?"

Regulus gritted his teeth, and, through them, he said, "One that I believe only you can fulfil, or would be willing to fulfil, without actually doing so too soon."

Hermione's brows drew together. She did not know this part of the story. She had the facts, of course, and a general idea of the order of events. She knew that Regulus would die a hero's death, but that, for a long time, the world would remember him as a coward who had gotten cold feet, and that his mother would bury an empty casket. She also knew that, in 1999, he would be awarded an Order of Merlin, First Class, in honour of his sacrifice, but that his casket would still be empty, his body would still belong to Inferi-ridden waters, and Kreacher would accept the award in his stead.

But the story did not make the narrative, and the details that formed the one playing out before her eyes were all new to her. She had not known that Regulus had been close to the

mother of Luna Lovegood, and closer still to Barty Crouch Jr. She had not known that he had spent over a year being trained by Tavaris Nott, nor that he had been fretted over and gotten his cheeks pinched by his cousin Bellatrix. She had not known that he had been betrothed to Bedelia Greengrass, the aunt of Daphne Pucey and the late Astoria Malfoy, and the great-aunt of their respective sons.

And she had not known that his and Barty's hands would linger sometimes, in ways suggestive of something which, in both magical and non-magical 1970s' Britain, was illegal for them to be doing.

Hermione's knees felt weak. She waited, fearful, because she did not know what she was waiting for.

For a long moment, Regulus' hand hovered near his pocket, hesitating; when he at last reached in, he withdrew a thin white letter. Staring at it as he turned it over in his hands, shielding the front from view, he said, "I realise that I have no right to ask anything of you. It is, after all, my fault that you ended up here … among others' … I willingly shared information on you with the Dark Lord, and yet, you've always treated me with kindness."

She, too, stared at the letter, a hot prickling at the corners of her eyes.

"Regulus —"

"The Dark Lord had my father killed," Regulus said, cutting her off. "Didn't he?" He raised his head to meet her gaze. "I know my father had a bad heart. That fails to explain how you knew to take Cissa and I into another room."

"I didn't know it would happen then," whispered Hermione, "but … yes, I knew."

"He wanted one of his own as Lord Black."

It wasn't a question, but she nodded, anyway.

Regulus exhaled slowly; this time, it was unsteady. "Well, he won't," he said. "That title will go to my grandfather soon enough."

Until 1990, when Pollux Black would also be dead. And for two years after him, Cygnus, and for four years, Sirius, and then no one ever again.

The prickling burned hotter, and Hermione's eyes began to water. Still, she waited.

"I owe you an apology," Regulus went on, his voice growing strained, "for the role that I played in your capture … and for how long it has taken me to admit that. Nevertheless, I must ask …" He didn't hide the depth of the breath he took then, or perhaps he simply couldn't; it rattled as it was drawn in, and again as it was released. Reluctantly, he held out the letter. "If you ever see my brother again … would you give this to him?"

On the front of the letter, Hermione now spotted the same smooth, curling script she had long ago seen on a note signed, *R.A.B.*. This time, it read, *Sirius*.

Her hand trembled as she took it.

“I won’t give up until it’s in his hands,” she said honestly. Tears threatened to slip free as she blinked, wrenching her eyes from the name. “I promise.”

“Thank you. Mione.” Regulus paused for a second, then added, as though he were forcing himself to jump into cold waters before he had the chance to back out, “And I’m sorry.”

He glanced at the letter for the last time, seeming to struggle with the knowledge that its fate was now in someone else’s hands. Alas, she thought that might have been the point of giving it to her. Perhaps he had debated whether to deliver it at all, and had ultimately decided to pass it on to someone who may or may not ever be able to; he would die without ever having to choose.

“Regulus,” Hermione said quickly, her voice wavering, and he looked back at her. “You’re doing the right thing. Has anyone ever told you that?”

Regulus smiled humorlessly.

“All my life,” he said. “But those people don’t know what the right thing is, either.”

He said no more, and nor did she, as he removed the wards on the door, and slipped out into the corridor. Only then did Hermione whisper, “I’m sorry, too.”

Alone, she let her tears fall, and began to struggle out of the sleeves of her dress, shoving the neckline down to her waist. Grimacing as she stretched her arm behind her, she tucked the letter under the clasp of her bra, then pulled the dress back up. Stepping in front of the small, gilded mirror that hung by the door, she twisted round to get a glimpse of her back. The fabric of the dress was thick and dark — maroon, Ron’s least favourite colour — and it hid the shape of the letter; the tight fit, meanwhile, kept it secured.

This letter, Hermione would guard with her life.

*

Christmas passed in a blur. For twelve days, a massive Yule log, found in the nearby snow-covered woods and Levitated inside by Tavaris, was burned in the fireplace in the lounge. It was a Pagan tradition that the visiting Notts enjoyed taking part in, and that Hermione lacked the motivation to be excited about, no matter how fascinating she had found it in her readings.

On the night of the twenty-fourth, the Notts celebrated raucously. They laughed and shouted, drunk on wine and spirits, and danced about the Great Hall to Yuletide carols, none of them sung by Celestina Warbeck, but a few echoed by the suits of armour. At brunch the following morning, they cured their hangovers with inaccurately measured mimosas, then carried on with straight champagne when the orange juice ran out, and as they gathered round the tree to exchange gifts.

Hermione opened Theodore's astoundingly large pile for him, doing her best to seem cheerful so that he might sense her excitement, perhaps even share in it. When she unwrapped a copy of *L'Oiseau et la Baleine* from Ivette, Barnett, and Delany, she dutifully feigned surprise. The rest of the pile was made up of various magical toys (most of which he was not yet old enough to play with), dummies, storybooks, blankets, clothes, and other items that he had already received mounds of at the recent celebration of his birth. It was without a doubt that he did not require this many things, but it was also without a doubt that Tavaris would be opposed to letting Hermione donate any of it.

The half-dozen custom ornaments in recognition of Theodore's first Christmas, however, would have to be pried from her cold, dead hands.

For herself, the gift pile was nearly as big, and probably twice as expensive. Hermione unwrapped a set of diamond earrings and a matching choker, a pair of satin heels that were laced up with white ribbon, a silver tennis bracelet that gleamed in the candlelight, a new bottle of Narcissa's favoured perfume, a mink fur coat (because, to no shock, none of them had any qualms about animal cruelty), a golden hairpin embedded with small rubies, a set of emerald robes embroidered with silver, and several more articles of clothing in the colour blue. She smiled for Theodore and no one else, but at least managed a few grateful looks, here and there.

The final gift she opened was her favourite: a book of sheet music, filled to the brim with songs composed by the greatest pianists in wizarding history. All those months spent sitting at the piano in the lady's parlour, trying her hardest to relearn how to play, had not gone unnoticed. Presently, she had no chance of playing any of the songs in the book, far above her skill-level as they were, but it was nevertheless nice to receive a gift for her mind rather than her appearance.

The book had come from Tavaris, but the accompanying card read: *To Mother, Love Theodore*.

Warmth flooded her chest, enveloping her heart, and Hermione's smile softened, becoming genuine. She did not bother to wipe away the tears she shed.

"Oh, Theodore, my love, you shouldn't have," she said, showering Theodore's entire head with kisses as he babbled contentedly. "I love it! I love it *so*, *so* much." To Tavaris, she added, mouthing the word, "*Thanks*."

Alas, as the day wore on, she grew cold again.

Dinner that night was as loud as the one that had preceded it. Every item included in the feast laid out on the table of the formal dining room had been selected by Hermione, yet she scarcely ate any of it. For the duration of the meal, she did little except wait for its end.

Soon after it had, the cellar was raided at demands for more liquor. When the dancing commenced, even Theomund and Tate joined in, the former once more in possession of all his most treasured body parts.

Hermione watched from afar with Theodore cocooned in her arms, occasionally resting her head on the arm of the sofa, too heavy for her to hold up any longer. Tavaris kept them company, his tumbler of firewhiskey draining and refilling much too quickly. With his free hand, he went back and forth between stroking her hair and stroking Theodore's, and he remarked on her low mood by suggesting that the holidays had dredged up old memories of her lost loved ones. She did not deny it. It was better for everyone to believe this, and the last two Christmases, it had even been true.

What weighed on her now, though, chilling her bones and leaving her to toss and turn rather than sleep, had nothing to do with a longing for garden gnome tree-toppers, Celestina Warbeck's *A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love*, or Molly Weasley's cooking and knitted jumpers.

From Monday the seventeenth to Wednesday the twenty-sixth, Hermione's lungs burned, fighting for the air that they were denied by the white satin corset encasing her ribcage, and with it, Regulus' letter to Sirius.

Every night before she went to bed, she stashed the letter under the cushion of the loveseat, and every morning after she woke, she suffocated herself tying up the corset to tuck it away again. She ignored the discomfort and did not permit herself to make a single complaint, regardless of whether she would be the only one to hear it or not. Feeding Theodore became a challenge — as did all the lovely little perks that accompanied it — and she had to have Dinky help her to set more bottles aside for him, but it was worth it. Moreover, she could think of no better hiding spot. If the letter were kept anywhere besides on her person, it would be found by either Dinky or Goppy when they cleaned, and her old garter belt trick was completely out of the question now; she refused to let the Dark Lord discover this letter too.

It did not matter to Hermione how long she might have to go on restricting her airway like an upper-class woman from the 1800s, nor did it matter to her that she had no idea how she would ever be able to pass the letter on to its recipient. There was time yet to figure those things out; for now, all she had to do was keep the letter safe.

After the visiting Notts had said their farewells on the morning of the twenty-sixth, and whilst they waited for Goppy to finish packing up their belongings, Tavaris attempted (or seemed to attempt, anyway) to raise Hermione's spirits by giving her a tour of Nottingham Hall's library. She had yet to do more than poke her head inside curiously, either because she had been too busy with Theodore or because she had been too wary of interacting with those already occupying it. Now, she found herself craning her neck as though by doing so she might possibly be able to take in everything at once, all two stories and three conjoined rooms of patterned, emerald wallpaper, verdant carpeting, and mahogany bookcases that grazed a coffered ceiling. As her gaze travelled from row to row and trinket to trinket, she marvelled at the fact that, despite being thrice the size of the library at the Nott Estate, it somehow managed to be just as cluttered.

It was then that the news arrived.

Barty did not knock, nor did he give Goppy the chance to warn them of his arrival; he simply burst through the library doors, startling both Hermione and Tavaris from their perusal. His

face was contorted as though he were in agony, his eyes were red and swollen, and his hands shook violently as he approached them.

At once, Hermione knew it had happened.

"Barty?" Tavaris said, bemused. "What brings —?"

"I need to see the Dark Lord," Barty interrupted, in a cracked and frantic voice. He was panting heavily, as though he had raced all the way there, yet he spoke without pausing for breath. "I don't — I'm unsure where he is and if I'm permitted to summon him myself but — but I have to see him, I have to tell him —"

"Tell him what?" asked Tavaris, abruptly cooling. He narrowed his eyes at Barty. "You had best not be here to inform me that your father —"

"Regulus is dead."

Almost at once, the only sound in the library became that of Barty's desperate, uneven breathing. Hermione turned her back on him and Tavaris to face the row of overflowing bookcases behind her, hiding her expression.

"How?" Tavaris asked eventually.

"He confessed to having second thoughts about — *about following the Dark Lord*," choked Barty, his voice cracking again. He sounded as though the rest of him had begun to shake, too. "I tried to convince him, but he wouldn't — he wouldn't *listen*. He wanted to leave, he planned to run, and I couldn't change his mind, no matter — *no matter what I did* —"

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut against an onslaught of tears, her hand over her mouth to keep from making any noise —

"— so I killed him."

Her eyes flew back open, and she swayed in shock, knocked off balance. Her hand moved to grasp the shelf in front of her.

"You … you *killed* him …" Tavaris, too, sounded shocked. "*You killed Regulus*."

"Yes," Barty confirmed, panting still. "I've come to inform the Dark Lord. No one — no one knows yet, I didn't leave behind a body for them to find —"

Tavaris cut him off. "All right." Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione saw him nod to himself, his jaw clenched. "All right. Stay here with Mione. I will inform the Dark Lord myself."

"Yes — yes, sir, forgive me, I didn't know what else to do, I panicked —"

"I know, Barty," was all Tavaris said, before, with a fortifying breath, he left the library.

The doors had barely closed behind him when Barty broke. Gut-wrenching sobs tore their way out of him, and Hermione turned in time to see him stagger backwards to sink down onto the nearest seat: a black leather ottoman shoved into the crevice between two shelves. He propped his elbows up on his knees and buried his face in his hands, his shoulders shaking profusely.

For a minute, or possibly ten, nothing seemed real. Hermione felt as if she were watching the scene play out through the eyes of another, standing motionless in a body not her own. It was almost like diving into a pensieve; she was viewing someone else's memory, incapable of interacting with anyone or anything within it.

And then, unconsciously, her feet began to move, propelling her forwards; she found herself lowering onto the ottoman beside Barty. When she spoke, it felt as if she were starring in a film and had broken the fourth wall.

"You're lying."

Barty's head snapped up. He glared at her through his tears.

"As if *you* would know!" he spat furiously. He jabbed at his chest with a finger. "*I* was there! *Me*! Every step of the fucking way, *I* was there! But he didn't —" He dropped his head back into his hands, yanking on the ends of his straw-coloured hair, and let out an enraged cry. "*He didn't fucking listen to me*! *He's gone*!"

"Gone, yes," said Hermione, her voice barely above a whisper, "but you didn't kill him."

The next sound that left Barty's mouth was closer to a whimper. Somehow, that was worse.

With all the caution of someone approaching a cornered animal, Hermione raised her arm and wrapped it loosely around his shoulders, then tightly, when he collapsed against her side. The surrealness of the moment was indescribable. Never had she imagined that she might sympathise with him, especially not enough to hug him while he cried. The Barty of the future was, to her, a hideous human being; he was a fanatic with a mind warped beyond recognition. He did little more than disgust her.

Right now, though, Barty was just a very stupid boy who had spent far too long waiting for his father to come home, and whose best friend never would.

"You didn't kill him," Hermione said again. "I don't believe you ever could, not even with a wand to your throat."

After a while, Barty's sobs quieted, just enough to let him breathe, and he whispered brokenly, "The Dark Lord would've hunted him down … This way, Reggie can start over … He can be *free*, just like he wanted …"

He doesn't know, she realised, devastated. *He thinks Regulus ran away.*

"You did the right thing," she told Barty, just as she had told Regulus. They were the only words to come to mind.

Unlike Regulus, Barty did not smile, not even without mirth; he raised his head to look at her with incredible intensity, his face hardened and his eyes blazing.

“It’s what he deserves,” he said, in a low, dark voice, as she carefully retracted her arm. “And if you ever tell anyone he’s still alive, I will kill you.”

Hermione did not doubt it for a second.

Another tear escaped to streak down his already wet face, but Barty did not break his glare even to blink, nor did he raise a hand to wipe it away, and when the tear reached his lips and his tongue darted out to lick it, she suddenly understood.

This was the part where he lost his mind.

Chapter End Notes

It's never said in cannon precisely how everyone came to know that Regulus had turned traitor to Voldemort, or how he was killed. This is my head-cannon.

So you know: the French children's story, L'Oiseau et la Baleine, is about a friendship between a bird and a whale who ultimately part ways, as one is meant for the sea and one is meant for the land; although they loved each other, they knew that they weren't destined to be together, so they said good-bye to save themselves from further heartbreak.

The Rat

Chapter Summary

> ‘Til your world burns and crashes
> ‘Til your at the end, the end of your rope
> ‘Til you’re standing in my shoes, I don’t wanna hear a thing from you
> — Til It Happens To You, Lady Gaga

Chapter Notes

> CW: Graphic Depictions of Violence, and a rather unfortunate infestation of rats.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As he stood before Hermione and Barty in the library, the Dark Lord’s lips did not twitch in amusement, nor did his eyes narrow in curiosity or did his head tilt to one side in thought, for he was not amused, he was not curious, and he was not thoughtful.

He was livid.

“Does Tavaris tell me the truth?” he asked in a dangerously silky voice. His burning gaze was concentrated on Barty. “Is Regulus Black dead at your wand?”

Barty continued to hang his head. He was kneeling on the carpeted-floor like one might kneel before an altar, praying for their God to absolve them of their sins, and he had been since the Dark Lord had entered the library with Tavaris less than a minute ago. Hermione, meanwhile, remained on the ottoman, poised like a statue carved from stone, too stiff with apprehension to make a single move.

“Yes, my Lord,” Barty whispered. “That is the truth.”

“And?” the Dark Lord said, expectant, as if there were any chance that he had not already gotten an explanation out of Tavaris. “Are you not eager to clarify for Lord Voldemort the reason behind this impetuous decision of yours, Barty?”

He stalked forwards, closer, and his upper lip curled into a deadly sneer. He did not permit Barty to rise.

“This decision for which your Lord — your *master* — gave no order … no approval … and of which he was left grievously unaware?”

Barty's fingers dug into his thighs; Hermione guessed to stop their trembling.

"I hadn't planned it, my Lord," Barty began imploringly, "or I swear I'd have sought your approval. I'd not have so much as considered taking action myself until you gave the command, but it was only last night that R—Regulus admitted to having … *doubts* … about his allegiance to you."

"For how long had young Regulus been having these *doubts*?"

"I don't know, my Lord, forgive me, h—he only told me last night. He said he wanted to run, to abandon the cause, and he asked if I'd come — he begged me to — *but I would never*." Barty raised his head, looking up at the Dark Lord with an expression that was both fierce and beseeching. "I swear it, my Lord! I would never betray you! *Never*! I won't ever give you cause to doubt my faithfulness, believe —!"

"*Enough*!"

Barty hung his head again, breathing rapidly.

The Dark Lord extended one hand, the other holding his bone-white yew wand in a misleadingly loose grasp. "Give me your wand."

With haste, Barty complied.

"Ash?"

"Yes, my Lord. With a unicorn hair core."

The Dark Lord gave a short hum. He twirled Barty's wand between his long, pale fingers, inspecting it.

"A uniquely unyielding combination," he said after a moment. "It is said that an ash wand loses power when wielded by someone other than its original owner. There have even been wand-makers who claimed these wands may retaliate if one were foolish enough to try." He looked up, this time at Hermione, and added coldly, "To my side, Lady Nott."

Hermione's inhale was abnormally loud, and it took her a second to realise this was because it had been echoed by Tavaris. She glanced over at him, standing with tense shoulders between Barty and the doors, blocking the exit. He inclined his head ever so slightly; she forced herself to her feet, moving quickly to the Dark Lord's side.

The Dark Lord looked down at her in a way he never had before, not in this time and not in the next: with a gaze as cold as his voice; his eyes like blood splattered against snow, or a pool of it that had frozen over, blanketed by a sheet of ice.

"Take it," he said.

Hermione's brow furrowed. She glanced at Barty, who had once more raised his head, gawking, and again at Tavaris, whose eyes had widened almost imperceptibly; she followed their gazes to the Dark Lord's outstretched hand, and then she, too, was struck by the sight.

He was offering her Barty's wand.

She had not laid eyes on her own since the day she had been captured, and she had not held a wand at all since she had maimed Tavaris. The loss had not pained her as severely as she suspected it would have in any other set of circumstances, for she had already been shouldering losses far greater than merely being unable to use magic. After all, what was magic compared to her children? Compared to Ron, or Harry, or any of the rest of her family? What was magic compared to her life, and the very real possibility that she would lose it?

Now, however, as Hermione stared unblinkingly at the ash wand being extended to her, the loss felt insurmountable. She looked up at the Dark Lord, searching for the trick.

"Do not keep me waiting, Lady Nott," he warned. "My patience is already wearing thin."

Tentatively, waiting with bated breath for him to draw it away at the last second, or else turn it so the tip was aimed at her chest, Hermione grasped the wand.

At once, she felt the warmth of its magic, radiating off the wood to make the hair at the back of her neck stand up, goosebumps to rise from the skin of her arms, and tears to spring from her eyes; she felt it rush through her veins, a shot of adrenaline sending her heart racing, and she could do anything, was capable of anything; all she need do was seize the opportunity, seize the power that tickled at the very tips of her fingers —

The wand went cold, its warmth making a swift retreat. It did not like her, because it did not belong to her.

"Hold it still," the Dark Lord ordered. "Cast nothing." Transfixed, Hermione obeyed, and he pointed at the wand with his own, the yew within an inch of the ash. "*Prior Incantato*."

A gold light emitted from the tip of Barty's wand, dimmer than it should have been. She half-expected to be stung or burned, but, thankfully, the wand did not retaliate, even in its comparative lack of cooperation. The weak, ghostly echo of a lumpy mass of dark liquid, tinged faintly blue, flickered into existence before them; it hovered over the floor, and she could make out a few clumps of hair, a pair of unseeing eyes, flabs of skin, airless lungs tangled in roping intestines, and a still heart.

Os Remotionem: Torsten Nott's Bone-Removal Curse. Barty must have planned for this; whilst he was innocent of killing Regulus, he was still guilty of murder. The only question was whose.

"I admit," said the Dark Lord coolly, "I hadn't thought you capable, Barty. Of casting a curse as lethal as this one, yes, but on one of your own brethren … on someone who, as I understand it, you were exceptionally close to …"

Barty gulped loudly at the suggestive tone with which the Dark Lord had spoken those last few words, but then, with vehemence, he said, "For you, my Lord, there are no limits to what I will do."

“It certainly seems so. *Deletrius*.” The ghostly image vanished, never to be summoned again, and the Dark Lord lowered his wand. “Alas, I remain displeased that you failed to seek my approval before taking out a valued member of my ranks, a potential traitor though he may have been.”

“My Lord —”

“No. Don’t speak. I have asked you no questions.”

The library itself seemed to hold its breath as the Dark Lord lapsed into silence, debating his next move, or pretending to, more likely, to let the fear grow to a size at which it would be more satisfying to feed on.

Hermione’s eyes remained fixed on the wand in her hand: the wand that would continue to commit atrocity after atrocity for years to come, and that would help to put Frank and Alice Longbottom in the Janus Thickey Ward for the rest of their lives. In her hand, however, it was simply a wand, and she could not help but marvel at it.

I can escape, she thought, stunned. *I don’t have to wait, I can go now, today. I don’t have to stay here anymore.*

There were two other wands present in the library, though, and they worked far better for their owners than this one would for her. She would have to overpower both Tavaris and the Dark Lord, and then likely Dinky and Goppy as well.

But I can do it. I can try.

She would have to discover how to lower the wards holding her captive, then actually lower them before anyone caught up to her. But the risk was worth it, because she would be free — free to wait out the rest of the war on her own, and free to go home when the time came: home to Rose and Hugo, to Ron, to the other Weasleys, to her parents and to Harry and Ginny, and —

Theodore, Hermione thought, and her heart sank in her chest, the tears that swam in her eyes overflowing to slide defeatedly down her cheeks. *I can’t leave Theodore.*

And this was precisely where Theodore had to be if the timeline were to remain on its fated course, and it had to. She could try to leave, it was true, but she could not abandon him. The very idea of doing so made her feel as though a hand had torn into her chest to squeeze her heart in a cruel fist, crushing it as punishment for daring to consider the option at all.

Her family in the future did not need her, not yet, unaware as they currently were of her disappearance — her existence, even. Ron hadn’t been born yet, nor had Harry or Ginny. Not for another twelve years would the name *Hermione Granger* mean anything to the wizarding world.

But Theodore did need her, and he needed her now; he needed his mother and, truthfully, his mother needed him, too.

As though through a wall, Hermione heard the Dark Lord speak, and then the sound of agonised screams jolted her from her thoughts; the shock sent her stumbling backwards into a bookcase, away from Barty, who was now writhing on the floor, unwillingly tangling himself in his own robes.

With his wand, she could help him, stop his pain if she wanted to, just as she had prevented it all those months ago. But what would happen then? She had been instructed to cast nothing, and if she were to defend Barty, she would undoubtedly have to defend herself as consequence. She would have to fight, and what would stop the Dark Lord from punishing her to the fullest extent?

Hermione had been assigned one task, and that was to provide House Nott with an heir. Now that she had, her place there had become precarious.

"Well, after that, he can do with you as he pleases," the Dark Lord had told her the first time they had spoken. *"I will have no further use for you myself."*

What would be the point in keeping her around if she put up too great a fight?

I can't leave Theodore, she thought again, and, knowing exactly what she was doing, exactly what she was giving up, Hermione dropped the wand.

The Torture Curse was promptly lifted. Barty curled in on himself, moaning and whimpering in residual pain. The Dark Lord turned to face her.

A long moment passed, and then he began to laugh, a sound simultaneously deep and high, both staggered and delighted.

"*Oh*," he breathed through his mirth, "Mione, you wonderful, wonderful witch … You will never cease to amaze me, will you?" He turned away again, chuckling still, and added, "Rise, Barty — and pick up your wand."

Barty uncurled slowly, forcing himself to his knees as his muscles twitched relentlessly. He crawled over to grab his wand, then, with tremendous effort, got to his feet.

"You left no body, that was wise," the Dark Lord remarked. Any traces of his previous anger were gone. "But what other evidence might be traced back to you, I wonder? Where did you leave the traitor's remains?"

"In an alley n—not far from Grimmauld Place, m—my Lord," Barty stuttered hoarsely. He was swaying, as if he were seconds away from collapse. "No one knew we were meeting. My mother and our h—house-elf thought I was in bed, and h—his thought the same of him. There is — there is *nothing* that will lead back to me."

"Good." The Dark Lord began to pace slowly, his long, black robes billowing slightly as though caught in a nonexistent breeze. "No one can know of your involvement; that information shall remain in this room. I fear Bellatrix would tear you to pieces, regardless of her cousin's half-witted attempt at betrayal. He would have run to his brother, no doubt —

spilled whatever secrets he possessed to *Dumbledore's little Order* to avoid arrest … Yes. Yes, well done."

He stopped abruptly, facing Barty.

"Your faithfulness shall be rewarded. For now, leave us. Tavaris will handle the matter going forward. Return home to await the news, and when you do, react accordingly."

"Yes, my Lord, th—thank you," Barty said, in a weak, cracking voice. He bowed his head gratefully. "You are a most merciful —"

"Indeed, so must I be made to repeat myself? *Leave us*."

With another, rather clumsy bow, Barty staggered past Tavaris and, pausing for only a moment to steady himself against a large globe on a mahogany stand, left the library.

The Dark Lord turned. With long, unhurried strides, he closed in on Hermione, stopping less than a foot away. He towered over her; she had to tilt her head nearly all the way back to meet his gaze, finding his eyes alight with a foreboding anticipation.

"You once told me that Regulus took after Narcissa."

Her throat constricted, and she could have slapped herself for being so foolish as to have told him that — to forget that, even if it would be many years before Narcissa would act against him, he would still learn, and soon, that Regulus would. Every muscle in her body tensed, her neck straining and the back of her head pressed hard against the bookcase.

Distantly, Hermione wondered what had happened to her fight or flight response: the response that had seen her jumping through a trapdoor at twelve and sprinting through the Forbidden Forest with a werewolf at her heels at fourteen; the response that had seen her duelling Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries at sixteen, and duelling them again at the foot of the Astronomy Tower at seventeen; the response that had kept her alive through the ten months that she had spent as *Undesirable No. 2* — a title that had previously belonged to Bellatrix.

Lately, all Hermione was able to do was freeze, and wait for the danger to pass.

By the doors, Tavaris remained silent and stationary. It was like a repeat performance of the scene in the master closet earlier that month; the unbidden comparison did nothing to assuage her fear.

"Tell me, do I have reason to distrust her?"

"No," said Hermione at once, shaking her head. "Narcissa knows her place, she would never betray you. That —" she swallowed, her mouth dry, "— that's why she and Regulus are alike; their duty is to their family first, everyone else second. But Narcissa is a Malfoy now, not a Black, and the Malfoys' duty is to you."

The Dark Lord nodded slowly, never breaking his gaze, yet never diving into her mind, either. Apparently, he trusted that she was telling the truth.

“I handed you a wand,” he said eventually: “a means of escape.”

Hermione said nothing.

The Dark Lord’s lips stretched into a triumphant grin. He leaned closer still, as if to tell her a secret.

“*You dropped it*.”

*

On the twenty-ninth of December, *The Daily Prophet* ran the headline: *YOUNG LORD ABANDONS DEATH EATERS: REGULUS BLACK DEAD AT EIGHTEEN*.

The article beneath it was accompanied by two vastly different photographs, the first of which appeared to have been taken quite recently. It captured Regulus, Walburga, and Orion all standing stiffly before the Black family tapestry in the drawing room of Number 12 Grimmauld Place, the latter’s hand placed firmly on Regulus’ shoulder; none of them were smiling, and Regulus’ eyes looked as though they were already dead. But the second photograph was much, much worse.

In thick, bloody letters on the grimy brick wall of a filthy alleyway was the word, *COWARD*. The image remained for a few seconds before a warning appeared overtop: *GRAPHIC DEPICTION OF VIOLENCE AHEAD*. As the warning faded, the image changed, bringing the Aurors who hovered in the background into view, and on the slush-covered ground, amidst the same remains that had appeared on the library floor at Nottingham Hall, was the pale, bloodied skin of what was once a forearm, on which the Dark Mark gleamed ghoulishly. Once more, the image changed, and the Mark was reflected in the sky above.

This, Hermione realised, was what Tavaris had done to cover Barty’s tracks. With great attention to detail, he had thoroughly painted the story that the Dark Lord wanted told. And, perhaps assuming an animal of some sort had gotten to it first, when he had failed to uncover the evidence of Regulus’ Dark Mark, he must have summoned the Dark Lord to brand the skin anew, ensuring that the wizarding world knew precisely whom Regulus had betrayed.

She sincerely hoped that whomever of his friends read the article first, they kept Sirius from seeing the second photograph, for he would not know the mess of boneless remains was not his younger brother.

At the old Black estate called Blackwood Manor on the morning of New Year’s Eve, two days after the article had been published, the ashes of those remains were buried next to Orion, not an empty casket. That a man who was in all probability a Muggle had been put to rest in the family cemetery of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black turned out to be utterly unfunny. For obvious reasons, Hermione did not attend the funeral, but she wondered if Sirius had, or if he had at least attempted to, only to be turned away by Walburga and the rest of the Black family.

The letter from Regulus remained hidden, day after day, within the confines of Hermione’s corset. She attempted to scout out other potential hiding spots within the Nott Estate, but to

no avail. She felt constantly light-headed, experiencing moments of intense dizziness whenever she climbed the stairs or stood up too quickly; however, to her, the side-effects were no more than minor inconveniences. Sirius deserved to read his brother's final words to him, and whatever challenges she might face on her way to accomplishing that were insignificant.

Besides, as the temperature outside rose from downright frigid to uncomfortably cold at the arrival of January, and, with it, the year 1980, Hermione's mind was occupied by an entirely different matter.

I can't leave Theodore.

This revelation was accompanied by a sense of dawning horror and a dread that began to eat at her, ruthlessly consuming her whole being until she felt positively ill with it.

I can't leave Theodore.

How would she ever escape if her heart refused to part with him? How would she ever return to the future if she was unwilling to abandon him?

I can't leave Theodore.

And how would she ever manage to keep convincing herself that she would merely be presumed dead if she never actually left?

For weeks, Hermione remained lost in her own head, struggling to interact with the world around her. She watched from windows and doorways as young recruits arrived and was unable to ponder the changes in their dynamics. Like an unfeeling machine, she added Lucius' name to the schedule in her journal (every Wednesday and Sunday afternoon) and replaced Regulus' name with Evan Rosier's. She listened to the voices of Tavaris, Abraxas, and Edmund each Thursday evening without truly hearing their words, and she had tea with an equally hollow shell of Narcissa without truly tasting it. Hidden away at night, she continued to sing Theodore to sleep, numb to the song.

On the twenty-sixth of the month, another headline managed to break through to her.

AURORS SUSPECT DEATH EATER INVOLVEMENT IN DISAPPEARANCE OF DAILY PROPHET *ILLUSTRATOR*.

With trembling fingers, she put down her morning tea, washed in a cold unrelated to the poor insulation of the conservatory. Beaming up at her from the third page of the *Prophet*, their arms hanging off each other's shoulders, were two brothers who looked very much alike: one was Orvyn Shacklebolt, and the other she immediately recognised as Kingsley. According to the caption, the photograph had been taken at a Quidditch match between Puddlemere United and the Tutshill Tornados that past November.

It had not only been Dean's father for whom Hermione had signed a death warrant; it had also been Kingsley's older brother. Somehow, she hadn't quite put that together before, even after learning the closeness of their relation from the files Tavaris had permitted her to borrow. She had been too focused on the reasons for transferring the target on Dean's mother's back to that of his father — too focused on those who would live as a result — that she hadn't processed just how many people she was hurting.

I told the Dark Lord to kill Kingsley's brother.

Kingsley was her friend — her mentor from the day she had joined the Ministry to the day she had vanished from it — and she was the reason that he had lost his brother.

How many more deaths would Hermione be complicit to before the war's end? Because if this went on, and the number of deaths that she either suggested or was an accomplice in for the sake of maintaining the timeline continued to rise, she did not know how she would ever be able to live with herself again.

Who gave me the right to play God?

Once, many years ago and many years away, Hermione had asked this question of Professor Dumbledore. He had fought both wars like the ultimate chess-master, weighing the odds each time he moved one of his pieces across the board, measuring their worth as he decided who needed to be sacrificed for him to put his opponent in checkmate. She was beginning to think that she was no better.

For a long time, she did nothing but stare at the happy image of the Shacklebolt brothers, and as she did so, she did not hope for forgiveness, for she did not know if she was deserving of it.

It was Crookshanks getting up from his spot on the tiled floor, cuddled up to Billy Stubbs in his pot, that drew her back to the present. She put the *Prophet* face-down on the table so that she wouldn't have to see the photograph and shoved her half-full plate away from herself, her appetite gone.

"Where are you off to?" she asked, watching Crookshanks stretch his bandy legs before heading for the glass-paned doors. He stopped there, looking back at her, and she sighed. "All right."

Adjusting the soft, cream-coloured fabric of the sling hanging from her shoulder, in which Theodore slept, Hermione stood from her seat to open the doors. Crookshanks trotted out and across the formal dining room, slipping under the table and chairs to get to the next set of doors, these ones already open.

Hermione wondered if today would be one of those days that she got dressed, or if it would be another that she would spend hiding away, lacking the motivation to do much of anything at all, let alone change out of her pyjamas. Her corset was on beneath them, any trace of it hidden by her dressing gown, and putting it on had used up the little motivation she had possessed.

“We’ll see you later, Billy,” she told the fern, right before a loud, startled yelp sounded from the front hall. It was swiftly followed by a decidedly feline yowl. Frowning, she left the conservatory to follow the path that Crookshanks had taken.

“Shit,” an oddly familiar voice muttered, just as she heard Crookshanks begin hissing furiously. “I didn’t know he — er — had a cat.”

“Oh, the cat does not belong to Tavaris,” said another voice, and it was sad that Hermione recognised this one first. “It belongs to his wife.”

As her anxiety spiked, her frown also deepened, for she had been informed that Snape had business elsewhere that day, and therefore, they were not expecting any visitors; she did not know what the Dark Lord could possibly want.

Instinctively, she wrapped Theodore in a protective embrace, and approached the doors to the front hall with small, wary steps, soundless on account of her slipper-clad feet. She had scarcely reached the threshold before she froze on the spot, feeling her blood run cold.

By the large front doors of the estate, squirming at the Dark Lord’s side as he attempted to shoo away a vengeful Crookshanks, was Peter.

“Good morning, Lady Nott,” the Dark Lord said, disconcertingly pleasant, and Peter’s head shot up.

At once, he paled.

“H—hello, Mione,” he tried.

Hermione continued to stare at him, wave after wave of dread washing over her. For a second, she thought she might have even stopped breathing.

She had not realised that they had reached this part of the story already.

Peter gulped nervously, his eyes darting to the Dark Lord and back before dropping to the sling.

“Is that — is that your son?” he asked. “His name is Theodore, right? I saw the announcement in the *Prophet*.”

Hermione didn’t say anything. Theodore began to mumble wordlessly, drifting towards wakefulness.

“Do forgive the intrusion, Mione,” said the Dark Lord, his lips twitching as he looked her over. “I see that you are unprepared for company.”

Peter’s eyes darted to him again, widening slightly.

That’s right, Hermione thought humourlessly; *the Dark Lord calls me by my first name. Surprised?*

“I have brought young Mr Pettigrew here to introduce him to Tavaris,” the Dark Lord continued. “He shall be joining those of my followers in training. Going forward, you can expect to see him here quite … often.”

“Well, then,” said Hermione, speaking at last. Her eyes suddenly felt wet, and a laugh bubbled up at the back of her throat, escaping in an admittedly hysterical huff. She shook her head slightly, and spotted Dinky lingering by the front doors, holding what must have been their cloaks. “Dinky, would you please bring Theodore up to the nursery and watch him for me while I attend to our guests?”

“Yes, Mistress,” said Dinky, with the all the attitude of someone thinking, *It’s about bloody time*. “Dinky is being *happy* to mind Master Theodore for you, as Is telling you many, many times.” With a snap of their fingers, the cloaks were gone, Banished to the basement. They hastened over to help her remove the sling, and as soon as they had Theodore settled in their boney arms, they Disapparated from the hall.

Tightening the tie of her dressing gown, Hermione walked towards Peter. Seemingly on instinct, he took a step back. All she did, however, was bend down to pick up Crookshanks, who was still hissing, attempting to claw through Peter’s trousers.

“If you would kindly follow me,” she said tremulously, “I’ll take you to Tavaris.” She turned with Crookshanks in her arms and started down the hall, her fingers trembling where they had settled in his fur. “He should be in his study at this time of day. Is he expecting you?” she added, glancing at the Dark Lord over her shoulder.

He appeared to be enjoying himself immensely.

“He is not,” he told her. “If he were, I suspect he would have warned you.”

“That’s debatable,” mumbled Hermione. She faced forward again as they neared the study door. “If we were to find ourselves with an infestation of rats, I would think Dinky would be the one he informed.”

She paused to give Peter a weak, blatantly false smile, before proceeding into the study. The Dark Lord chuckled as he followed her in, a still-pale Peter close behind.

“Tavaris.” Her voice shook. “We have guests.”

Already dressed for the day and sat behind his desk, Tavaris looked up from his copy of the *Prophet*, a cup of tea half-raised to his lips. He blinked, taken aback, then quickly put down both and stood to bow. Unlike in the cases of many of the other Death Eaters, the Dark Lord allowed Tavaris to remain on his feet, probably because he did not care to wait for him to struggle up from a kneel.

“My Lord,” Tavaris murmured dutifully. He straightened, looking curiously at them all. His eyes lingered on Hermione the longest, telling her that she was doing a poor job of hiding her emotions, but she knew that already. “What may I do for you?”

“I have a new recruit in need of training,” said the Dark Lord, approaching one of the chairs opposite the desk. He sat down, then gestured for Tavaris and Peter to do the same. “Mione, would you care to introduce your friend to your husband?”

Hermione twisted her lips for several seconds, biting down on the inside of her cheek. Her legs felt as though they might give out at any moment. Eventually, Tavaris reached out, taking her gently by the elbow; she staggered over to perch on the arm of his chair, Crookshanks still in her arms with his beady, yellow gaze locked on Peter.

“Tavaris,” she said haltingly, taking a deep breath, “meet Peter Pettigrew. Otherwise known as Wormtail.”

Peter winced.

“He is a pure-blood wizard who was born here in England — what — late June, early July, nineteen-sixty?”

Tavaris placed his hand on her back, rubbing it in slow, soothing circles. Hermione did not give Peter the opportunity to either confirm or correct her before continuing.

“He belongs to the Hogwarts graduating class of ‘seventy-eight and was a member of Gryffindor House.” She paused, taking another deep breath that had her chest pressing painfully against the corset, as something within her came alight, beginning to burn. “There, he met his closest, *dearest*, most *loyal* friends … Remus Lupin, Sirius Black, and James Potter.”

A smirk slowly spread across Tavaris’ face, and he now looked at Peter with an interest that had not been present before. Peter, meanwhile, was fiddling with the cuffs of his shirt, avoiding Hermione’s eyes.

“He is proficient in Transfiguration,” she went on, the burn spreading, growing hotter, “Charms and, should the situation call for it, Potions.”

To her mind came an image developed by her own imagination, inspired by a story she had heard only once before: a large, bubbling cauldron in the middle of a graveyard, bones stolen from the earth, a stump of a wrist, and blood drawn from Harry’s forearm.

Hermione glared at Peter, her voice shaking still but losing its hesitancy, the heat of her rising anger replacing it all in a rush.

“He is mildly clumsy, exceedingly insecure, and easily intimidated, he has a backbone made of straw and a hideously warped sense of honour, he is a traitor and a liar, and, most significantly, a *fucking rat* who is willing to betray the people who *love* him, and *support* him, who would *die* for him, just to save his own cowardly arse.”

By the time she finished, she was fuming and slightly out of breath. Both the Dark Lord and Tavaris appeared to be waiting for Peter to react, likely in defence of himself and his choices, but Peter did not say a word, only kept up his fiddling.

Eventually, Tavaris released a low, rumbling chuckle, reclining in his high-backed chair and letting his hand fall from Hermione's back.

"A very thorough introduction," the Dark Lord said, looking as though he, too, may laugh. "Thank you, Mione."

Hermione nodded tightly. She lifted one hand to wipe at the corners of her eyes, then returned it to Crookshanks.

"Now, *Wormtail*," said the Dark Lord lightly, turning his head to look at Peter, "might you have anything you wish to add, or do you agree that Lady Nott's introduction was more than sufficient?"

Peter cleared his throat and looked up, placing his hands on the arms of the chair. His cheeks were tinged pink, either with shame, embarrassment, or a combination of both, but his voice did not quiver.

"I'm an Animagus. I have been since I was fifteen."

"*Let me guess*," Tavaris drawled mockingly, "your form is a rat?"

It was rhetorical, but Peter nodded. "It's a small and an easily overlooked form," he said. "With it, I can enter places I otherwise can't, and I can listen in on conversations without the speakers being any the wiser. I'm also unregistered, so no one can recognise me in my form."

"No one?" said the Dark Lord sceptically.

"Well —" Peter winced for a second time, "— there are a few people who know, my — my Lord — but only a few," he hurried to add, "and most of them are unregistered Animagi themselves."

"Their names?"

He glanced at Hermione. "Well, Mione knows, for a start."

The Dark Lord, too, glanced her way, his eyes narrowing, but it was only a few seconds before he looked back at Peter.

"Who else?"

"Erm — Sirius, Sirius Black, his form is a dog; big with black fur, like the Grim."

Of course, Hermione thought, her face screwing up in disgust, *he sells Sirius out first.*

"James Potter, he's a stag. Lily — his wife, Lily — she knows, too. And then Remus Lupin. That's all of them."

"The latter two," said the Dark Lord inquiringly, "they are not Animagi themselves?"

“No, my Lord,” said Peter. He shook his head. “We only told Lily after she and James moved in together, and Mione sorted it out herself, really, after catching Sirius in his form.”

With unsettling slowness, Tavaris sat back up.

“And Lupin?” he asked, in a strange voice. “How did he find out?”

Hermione sucked in a breath.

“Remus has known practically since the beginning. The three of us surprised him with it once we completed our transformations.”

The Dark Lord tilted his head to one side, his eyes roving over Peter’s face. He began to drum his fingers against the arm of his chair.

“I’ve been given the impression that your little band of four is rather close-knit,” he said. “How is it that Lupin was left … out of the loop?”

Peter opened his mouth to answer —

“Don’t you dare.”

All eyes fell on Hermione, but her own remained on Peter. Her anger teetered on the edge of a cliff, an ocean of pure wrath waiting below to swallow her whole should it tip over.

“It was for him, actually,” Peter said, appearing to steel himself. “We became Animagi so that we could —”

“*Peter*, *don’t* —!”

“— keep Remus company on full moons.”

In the span of a single heartbeat, Hermione was on her feet, Crookshanks diving off her lap to dart round the desk and out of sight.

“That was *not* your secret to tell!”

Peter’s expression became strained, as if it were his patience being tested, not his resolve. “I serve someone else now,” he said firmly. “Any information I have belongs to the Dark Lord.”

“He *trusted* you!” she shouted. “They all did! *They were your friends*!”

“They don’t always act like it, though, do they?” Peter snapped. He gestured jerkily with his hand. “Telling me what to do; expecting me to do it without complaint. Always laughing at me like I’m nothing but a joke, kept around just to provide them with some fucking entertainment.”

“That’s not an excuse!” exclaimed Hermione, maddened. “Everyone feels left out sometimes, Peter! That’s life!”

Peter, too, was on his feet then.

“Sometimes?” he repeated incredulously. “It’s not *sometimes*, Mione, it’s always! They hardly see me as a person, let alone an equal! We walk down the bloody sidewalk and I’m stuck trailing at the back of the group because *Merlin forbid,* I’d ever be good enough to walk beside them!”

“That doesn’t give you the right to stab them all in the back!”

“This isn’t me stabbing them in the back!” Peter jabbed a finger at his chest, his face fixed in an indignant scowl. “This is me making my *own* choices for once, doing what *I* want! Not being bossed around like I’m their fucking lackey!”

“Congratulations, then!” Hermione threw her arms up. “You’re someone else’s lackey now!”

They were both up against the desk, and they leaned over it as they shouted, their faces rapidly turning red.

“I chose this!” Peter yelled, and there was a hiss, almost a growl; he kicked his leg out without looking, and Crookshanks made a shrill noise of pain. “I chose to serve the Dark Lord! And you don’t get to give me shit for that when *you’re* here, too!”

The rageful laugh that escaped Hermione sounded deranged even to her own ears.

“Don’t tell me you’re actually thick enough to believe I’m here by *choice*.”

Pointedly, Peter glanced at Tavaris and back.

“Well, you certainly look comfortable.”

Her jaw dropped. For a moment, she simply stood there, stupefied.

And then she reached over the desk, and slapped Peter across the face.

His head jerked to the side with the force. He looked stunned, lifting his hand to touch his reddened cheek.

Tears spilled forth to run down Hermione face, and she thought that she must have looked mad. She didn’t know why no one had bothered to stop her, nor why they still weren’t stopping her, especially when she had lost the ability to do it herself.

“My choices were stolen from me the day they took my wand!” she screamed. “I didn’t *choose* to be here; I was Stunned in the back as I left graduation — I was married at *wandpoint*! I don’t —!” She choked, her chest heaving against the corset. “*I DON’T EVEN HAVE ANY MEMORY OF HOW MY SON WAS CONCEIVED*!”

The study was seized by an awful, stilling silence. Peter stared at her in alarm, still clutching his cheek. The Dark Lord’s expression was inscrutable. Hermione had her back to Tavaris, so she could make no guess as to what he was thinking.

“Don’t ever imply that I had a choice,” she whispered darkly. “Don’t you dare.”

“All right,” Tavaris said abruptly, his voice level yet loud in the quiet. “My Lord, if I may?”

At the Dark Lord’s nod, Tavaris heaved himself to his feet, not bothering with his walking-stick as he took Hermione by the elbow again. She tried to jerk her arm away immediately.

“Don’t touch me!”

It came as no surprise that he ignored her; powering through the pain of his injured leg, he half-led and half-dragged her towards the door.

“Go,” he said, opening it for her with his other hand. He nodded out at the hall, his jaw tight and his expression immovable. “This is not how you’re supposed to be behaving and you know it. Go calm down before you get yourself into trouble.”

Glowering, Hermione jerked her arm away again, this time successfully, because Tavaris allowed it.

His tail tucked between his legs, Crookshanks came scampering out from under the Dark Lord’s chair to follow her as she stepped past the threshold of the study. She turned back to look past Tavaris at Peter.

“That was not your secret to tell,” she repeated, and then the door slammed shut in her face.

For a minute, Hermione stood there, motionless, heaving still, silent tears rolling down her cheeks, and then Crookshanks mewled and pawed at her leg, drawing her gaze from the closed door. She bent to lift him into her arms, and he rested his chin on her shoulder as she turned on her heel and rounded the wide staircase.

“Not very nice, is he?” she murmured, sniffling, as she began to climb the steps. Her head spun, but she did not stop to catch her breath or wait for the dizziness to subside, too determined to further the distance between herself and the study. “Are you alright, Crooks?”

Another distinctly distraught mewl was her only response, and she nodded grimly, planting a wet kiss on his head.

“I know. I don’t much like him, either. Unfortunately, he won’t be going anywhere anytime … soon …” She trailed off, her feet dragging her to a halt, black spots dancing at the edges of her vision.

Blinking hard, Hermione looked down at Crookshanks. He raised his head, looking back up at her, and her lips slowly crept up into a small smirk.

“*Oh*,” she breathed softly, “Crookshanks, you clever, clever cat … You’re going to remember this, aren’t you?”

*

The sun was beginning to go down by the time Tavaris came looking for Hermione. The nursery was engulfed in a dim, orange glow, the clouds parting to allow the last remnants of sunlight in through the windows. She was still in her pyjamas, sitting on an armchair that she had pushed up against Theodore's bassinet, Crookshanks at her feet and a copy of Bathilda Bagshot's *The Decline of Pagan Magic* in her lap.

As the day had worn on, she had been left drained, as if expressing such strong emotions that morning had taken everything out of her. She had not bathed — in how many days, she could not recall — and her hair now resembled Snape's more than it did her own. Her teeth felt layered in grime, and, disgusted, it almost made her brush them, but she could not find the motivation to leave her spot at Theodore's side.

When the nursery door came swinging open with incongruous force, inciting a startled cry from Theodore, Hermione barely spared it a glance, setting her book down and rising to lift him from the bassinet. The heaviness of not one but two pairs of footsteps and the loud, agitated sound of Tavaris' voice, however, had her doing a double-take.

"Put Theodore down, you need to get dressed," Tavaris said as he stormed towards her. "And for fuck's sake, wash your bloody hair —"

"Lower your voice," Hermione said sharply. She began to bounce Theodore in her arms as she looked between Tavaris and Edmund, the latter of whom was pacing the floor. "What's going on?"

"We're to be having a few unexpected guests for dinner," Tavaris said stiffly. His knuckles were white where they gripped the handle of his walking-stick. Judging by his strained expression, she suspected that, were he able to, he would also be pacing. "Where is Dinky? Dinky!"

In no time at all, Dinky was standing between them.

"What can Dinky be —?"

"Take Theodore, you'll be watching —"

"What guests?" interrupted Hermione, spinning away from Dinky, who was already reaching for Theodore.

Edmund halted his steps and spun round to face her.

"Crouch," he said gravely. "Crouch is coming."

Hermione was bewildered. "What's the fuss about, then? It's only Barty."

"Oh, yes." Tavaris chuckled darkly. "Only Barty." He leaned forwards, his glare jarring, and spat, "Barty *Sr*!"

Her eyes nearly bulged out of her head.

"You mean to tell me that the Head of Magical Law Enforcement is coming *here*?"

“Stubborn Mistress, stop squirming!” grouched Dinky, jumping on the tips of their toes as they continued grappling for Theodore. “Dinky must —!”

Theodore’s cries became wails, blocking out the rest of Dinky’s sentence.

“Shut that baby up already!” snapped Edmund.

Hermione shot him a glare, opening her mouth to snap back, but before she could, Tavaris was seizing her arm, yanking on it, and she had to hand Theodore to Dinky so he wouldn’t be jostled — or worse, dropped.

“They’ll be here in an hour,” Tavaris said, gritting his teeth. “Crouch says he’s got some sort of proposal for us.” He yanked on her again, hard, and she stumbled in the direction of the conjoining ensuite door. “He’s bringing Bones with him, not to mention a fucking *Auror* —”

The door was kicked open, and Hermione shoved at him uselessly with her free arm as she was dragged through the bathroom and into her bedroom.

“Bones who?”

“Martin Bones,” replied Edmund, entering behind them, “Head of the Improper Use of Magic Office. And his eldest will be accompanying him — Edgar, *who’s in the fucking Order*!”

Hermione’s heart dropped to her stomach, and she thought her eyes might truly be in danger of popping out. Suddenly, her arm was released, and she found her jaw being grasped instead, her head jerked to the side and up so that she was meeting Tavaris’ hard gaze.

“*You will be on your best fucking behaviour*,” he said, and she wished she could say that the low, threatening tone of his voice did not frighten her. “I don’t want to hear a word of what you saw fit to shout about this morning, is that clear? Because I swear, Mione, if you so much as let *one thing* slip, if you attempt to pass a *single* message, the Dark Lord may not let you live long enough to regret it.”

Something seemed to have lodged itself in her throat, blocking her airway, and Hermione swallowed fearfully in a failed attempt to clear it.

“I won’t,” she gasped. “I promise.”

Tavaris searched her eyes, and for a long, terrifying moment — the sort of terrifying that Hermione usually reserved for the Dark Lord — he did not speak.

Eventually, Edmund got impatient.

“We haven’t the time for this, Tavaris!”

At last, Tavaris let her go roughly, backing away. Hermione’s hand shot up to rub her jaw as she struggled to fill her burning lungs.

“Will you need a dose of the Draught of Peace for this, or will you be able to manage on your own?”

“I c—can manage.”

“Then I expect to see you downstairs by half-past six with a smile on your face to greet them all.”

Still breathless, Hermione nodded quickly.

Tavaris stared at her a moment longer, before raising a hand to point at her, and adding once more in warning, “*Best fucking behaviour*.” He then turned sharply on the spot and marched out of the room with Edmund at his heels. The door slammed shut behind them, leaving her alone save for her desperate gasps and spotted vision.

“That one’s Edgar Bones, Susan’s uncle … Moody said they got him and his family, too …”

Lightheaded, Hermione staggered backwards until the backs of her thighs hit the bed; she grabbed the nearest poster to keep herself upright, blinking away the spots, and did not move until a minute later, when the dizziness had subsided. Unsteadily, she made her way into her ensuite to draw herself a bath. As the tub filled, steam rising off the water and fogging the mirror above the sink, she began to undress. Her hands trembled with each piece of clothing that she removed, and when Regulus’ letter fell to the floor with the corset, she froze.

This was an opportunity, she realised — one that she had doubted she would ever be given. If she could somehow get the letter into Edgar Bones’ hands, he would be able to pass it on to Sirius. The neatly-printed name on the front would be enough for him to know what to do; she need not say anything at all.

“— if you attempt to pass a single *message, the Dark Lord may not let you live long enough to regret it.”*

Hermione bent slowly to pick it up off the cool tile; in her hands, the letter shook with indecision.

I can’t leave Theodore.

Laden with guilt, she stashed it behind a clutter of skincare products at the back of the cupboard under the sink, just in time for her discarded clothes to vanish from the floor, taken away for cleaning. Avoiding her reflection, she stepped back, turned off the faucet of the tub, and lowered herself into the warm water, wondering all the while when she had become such a coward.

By a quarter-past six o’clock, Hermione looked like Lady Nott again. Her makeup was kept light and her clean, shining hair had been pinned back with two pearl clips to match both her earrings and necklace; her feet were clad in sheer, silver stockings and grey satin heels; a new corset encased her ribcage, this one pink with white roses stitched onto it, chosen from the wide selection of undergarments she had been given; and overtop the corset was a long, steel-blue twill dress with lantern sleeves. She longed for trousers, and for the knitted warmth of a Weasley jumper, but for Theodore’s sake, she would play whatever role necessary, and this one was.

Down the stairs she went, holding tight to the railing, and she was more appreciative than ever to see the changes she had made to the interior of the estate; it resembled a home now, and that was an observation that Edgar Bones needed to make. Anything he heard or saw that evening would be reported back to the Order of the Phoenix — and wasn't that a scary thought? She was opening her doors, inviting them in to take a look at what had become of her. What would Edgar be telling everyone at their next meeting? The avoidance to wonder too long about what those whom she had spent that year at Hogwarts with thought of her now was gone, as if it were a rug that had been pulled out from under her feet.

Part of Hermione wished Edgar would be able to inform everyone that she was miserable, a prisoner, so that someone — anyone — would acknowledge just what she was sacrificing by being there. Alas, a greater part of her recognised the value of maintaining her charade, so as she crossed the front hall to the sitting room, she was glad for its achieved warmth, and for the framed photograph of Tavaris, Theodore, and herself that had appeared in the *Prophet* in mid-November that rested on the side table.

On the mantle of the sitting-room fireplace were three more photographs: one of the three of them at the celebration of Theodore's birth, one of Theodore with Lucius and Narcissa, and another of the entire Nott family standing in front of that year's Christmas tree. The bookcase next held no texts regarding Dark magic, and the room itself had been softened, made brighter even in candlelight.

Hermione surveyed it all upon entry, nodding to herself in approval, much like Tavaris did when he saw her.

"A proposal, you said." She sat down beside Edmund on the sofa nearest to Tavaris' armchair, crossing her legs at the ankle. "That's the reason for Crouch's visit. Do you have any idea what it's about?"

Tavaris shook his head. He had a tumbler of firewhiskey in his hand, which he studied as though longing to down it all at once.

"I received an owl from Crouch not long after the Dark Lord and Peter Pettigrew took their leave."

"Peter Pettigrew?" said Edmund questioningly.

Tavaris sniggered slightly.

"Edgar Bones will not have been the first member of the Order of the Phoenix to set foot here today," he told him, smirking. "The Dark Lord has found himself a spy."

Hermione cleared her throat uncomfortably.

"Ah, pardon me, I meant rat."

Edmund sat forward, his eyes gleaming. His own tumbler dangled between his knees, held loosely by his fingers.

“There’s a member of the Order among us now?” he asked, in a hushed voice. “A direct line to Dumbledore right in our pocket?”

“Oh, yes. But wait on telling the boys. The Dark Lord hasn’t yet decided who will or will not be granted knowledge of the spy’s identity.”

“Has he been Marked yet?”

“It’s been scheduled for this Friday,” said Tavaris, “right before he joins his mother on a visit to his great-aunt’s for the weekend. You remember how our arms were for the first few days; we cannot afford to have Pettigrew revealing himself all because he cried after someone elbowed him.”

Edmund laughed quietly, looking nostalgic. “Yes, I remember,” he said. “Hurt like a bitch, especially when you decided it’d be funny to keep poking us all.”

“What can I say? I live to entertain myself.”

Not a moment after Tavaris had spoken, a heavy rapping came upon the front doors, reverberating through the hall to reach their ears. Hermione took a deep, steadying breath before getting to her feet.

“Let’s see that smile, darling.”

She recalled a memory of Crookshanks chasing Scabbers across the common room in Gryffindor Tower and allowed her lips to stretch into a pleased grin.

Tavaris nodded his satisfaction. “Bring them in,” he told her, and he gave her a pointed look. “And, Mione? Remember, even from another room, we can still hear you.”

Hermione squared her shoulders, turning, and strode out into the hall. *I am happy to be here,* she told herself as she approached the front doors. *I am a dedicated housewife and a most gracious host.* Adjusting her smile, she grasped one of the silver handles — *I love my husband* — and opened the door.

Immediately, she was met with the almost skull-like face of Barty Crouch Sr, albeit a less wrinkled one. His short, peppery hair was abnormally straight, parted evenly down the middle, and his toothbrush moustache reminded her simultaneously of Charlie Chaplin and Adolf Hitler. He wore an open black cloak, robes of the same colour that gave the impression of a serious businessman, and a flat smile.

“You must be Lady Nott,” he said.

“Yes, it’s wonderful to make your acquaintance, Mr Crouch,” Hermione said politely, stepping aside. “Please, come in.”

With a nod, Crouch passed through the half-open doorway and into the hall. The next man to step up to the doors was wearing navy robes and a brown tweed cloak. Like Crouch, his hair was flecked with grey, and he had an angular jaw and eyes that crinkled at the corners when he smiled, offering his hand.

“Martin Bones,” he said warmly. “Pleased to meet you, Lady Nott.”

Hermione shook his hand.

“The pleasure is mutual, Mr Bones. Come in, I’ll summon our house-elf to collect your cloaks in just a moment.”

“Thank you,” said Mr Bones, stepping inside and shrugging off his cloak. He turned, beckoning the young man behind him to follow. “This is my eldest, Edgar. He’s in Wizengamot Administration Services. I figured he could learn a thing or two by being here today.”

Edgar Bones looked very much like his father; he had the same brown hair and defined jaw, and even wore a similar brown cloak. However, even though he must have been in his late-twenties or early-thirties, his face remained youthful, pink from the cold and littered with freckles. He possessed the inexplicable air of someone who could be depended on.

As Edgar entered, he eyed Hermione closely, his smile very slight.

“Good evening, Lady Nott,” he said, extending his hand to her. “Thank you for having us over on such short notice.”

“It’s no trouble at all, Mr Bones,” she said, and she hoped that he could not feel how fast her pulse was when she shook his hand, his fingers grazing her wrist. “We’re glad for your company.”

It was not until she watched the faint lines of wariness on Edgar’s face smooth out that she realised they had even been there in the first place. What had he been told to expect, Hermione wondered, if the sight of her had made him wary?

“Please, call me Edgar.”

She blinked, returning to herself; Edgar was nodding to his father.

“That there is Mr Bones.”

She made a soft sound of amusement, then looked away to greet the final man in Crouch’s entourage, whose robes were a uniform maroon.

The Auror.

Standing about a foot taller than her, both broad-shouldered and burly, his figure was automatically imposing. His grizzly, ginger hair resembled the mane of a lion, his face appeared to have been carved from wood, and his two dark eyes were narrowed shrewdly as he looked her over, no trace of a smile on his lips.

Her own smile fell, and she stared up at him, her mouth hanging half-open.

Two dark eyes.

Her gaze promptly dropped to his feet, where she spotted two worn, clunky boots sticking out from under the hem of his robes. There was no sign of a peg-leg.

“Lady Nott,” Mad-Eye Moody grunted in greeting. He was not Mad-Eye, though — not yet. At present, he was just Alastor.

Hermione jerked her head up.

“Pardon me,” she said hastily, “Auror —?”

“Moody.”

“Auror Moody.” She nodded, forcing herself to smile again. She swept her arm out in a welcoming gesture. “Come in.”

With another grunt, Moody entered the estate, wasting no time in surveying his surroundings. Neither Crouch nor Mr Bones appeared to find it odd, speaking in undertones as they waited. They would likely write this off as a routine sweep; a safety measure that, even on the occasion that it proved pointless, still had to be done.

Hermione, on the other hand, was becoming increasingly aware of the tightness of her corset.

Even in the absence of a magical eye, Moody’s suspicious gaze seemed to take in every detail, regardless of significance. It zeroed in on the side table, where, next to the photograph of Hermione, Tavaris, and Theodore, there sat a vase of royal lilies. Moody glanced back at her, then at Edgar; he jerked his chin at the vase, and Edgar’s eyebrows shot up in an expression of such surprise that she could not help being affronted. Why was a vase of lilies so shocking? Had they assumed that she no longer cared for Lily? That their friendship had been an act on her part, and that she was truly no different from Tavaris in her beliefs?

A sudden gust of wind reminded Hermione that she was still holding the door; she put her back to everyone to shut it, taking advantage of the moment to gather herself. The attempt to do so proved unsuccessful, however, because one thought remained firmly in her head as she turned back round, and it filled her with an unexpected bitterness.

What the fuck is being said about me in the Order?

Chapter End Notes

At the next Order meeting:
Moody: And then she stared at my leg like she was surprised to see it there!
Dumbledore: Oh, dear. Do I tell him?

A Seat at the Table

Chapter Summary

> Generals gathered in their masses
> Just like witches at black masses
> Evil minds that plot destruction
> Sorcerer of death's construction
> — War Pigs, Black Sabbath

Chapter Notes

> CW: implied/referenced rape/non-con.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Goppy gathered the cloaks of Barty Crouch Sr, Alastor Moody, and Martin and Edgar Bones to be dried from the snowfall and hung up in a cupboard in the basement, Hermione began leading the group down the right side of the front hall.

"This way, please," she said in a measured voice. "Tavaris and Edmund are just in the sitting room. Dinner will be served at seven, but I'd be happy to fix any of you a drink in the meantime."

"You wouldn't happen to have any scotch, would you?" Crouch asked, walking at her side.

"There should be a bottle of Sorcerer's Smoking Scotch on the cart," Hermione replied. "We keep it on hand for when Cygnus is over — Cygnus Black."

"I'll have a glass of that, then, if you wouldn't mind. Make it neat."

"Of course, Mr Crouch."

When the five of them passed the informal dining room and entered the sitting room, Tavaris and Edmund both rose.

"Crouch," Tavaris greeted. He shook Crouch's hand, then stepped back to allow Edmund to do the same. "And Bones, young Bones, good to see you both." When he spotted Moody lingering at the back of the group, his face went blank. He gave him a cool nod. "Auror Moody."

Edmund's eyes darted to Moody, and his lips pursed in annoyance before he, too, wiped away his expression.

"Sit wherever you'd like," said Tavaris, returning to his armchair. He shot Hermione a meaningful look and, with one of her own — a silent message of, *I know* — she strode over to the drink cart to pour Crouch's scotch. "So, what prompted this meeting? I admit your owl came as rather a surprise."

"Indeed," said Edmund. "Given the madness of ministerial affairs at the moment, I'd imagine you all have your hands full, Saturday or not."

"That's true enough," said Crouch, taking a seat next to Edmund and setting a leather briefcase down at his feet. Edgar and Mr Bones sat down on the sofa opposite, the latter nodding soberly.

"It's been a while since any of us made it home for dinner on a semi-regular basis," said Mr Bones. "And Edgar's got two young ones at home," he added, gesturing to his son; "at least all that awaits me is Kathleen, whom I'm sorry to say has long since grown accustomed to dining alone."

"Has Amelia moved out, then?" asked Hermione, coming over to hand Crouch a tumbler of smoking auburn liquid. "Here you are, Mr Crouch."

"Thank you."

"Not yet, no," said Edgar, a little cagily. "But her job's got her stuck at the Ministry most days as well."

Mr Bones chuckled. "As would be the case for anyone working as *your* secretary, Barty."

Crouch made a face that was rather like a shrug and swallowed his first sip of scotch; with his next exhale came a puff of sweet-smelling smoke that reminded Hermione of Muggles and their failed attempt at helping consumers quit smoking by providing an electronic alternative to cigarettes.

Dudley Dursley had one, of course.

A snort drew her attention to Moody, who was openly investigating the contents of the bookcase. Tavaris was lucky that she had replaced everything that could be deemed the slightest bit Dark, although Moody was likely aware those texts were merely kept elsewhere; he could not prove it, and that was all that mattered.

"*Hairy Snout, Human Heart*," Moody read aloud, raising his eyebrows at the title. "Would've thought I'd find a copy of *Lupine Lawlessness* rather than this." He shot a sardonic look at Tavaris, adding, "Sympathetic towards werewolves, are you, Nott?"

Tavaris visibly ground his teeth together.

"I cannot say that I am, no. It must have been Mione who put that there."

“Emerett Picardy’s works regarding werewolves are vile,” said Hermione crisply, because she could not help herself. She turned back to the drink cart. “Mr Bones, Edgar, would either of you care for a drink?”

“I wouldn’t mind a spot of firewhiskey,” said Mr Bones. “On the rocks, please. Edgar?”

Edgar’s reply was curt. “I’m fine, thanks.”

Hermione nodded, shovelling frozen rocks from the ice bucket to add to a new tumbler and deliberately avoiding the side-eye Tavaris was giving her.

“You won’t find any of Picardy’s works on that shelf,” she carried on, as she picked up the bottle of Ogden's Old Firewhiskey. “*Why Lycanthropes Don’t Deserve to Live*? I’m appalled that a title so dehumanising managed to reach publication.” *Which is why I had it banned.* “But enough of that.”

She turned back to serve Mr Bones his drink, then met Moody’s narrowed gaze with a smile.

“Can I get you anything, Auror Moody, or are you on duty?”

“Don’t bother,” said Moody gruffly, which Hermione took to mean that he wasn’t, not officially. He placed *Hairy Snout, Human Heart* back on its shelf and continued his snooping, his body angled so that his back was never fully turned. The Silenced portrait of Cantankerus sneered down at him, probably furious that Moody had the audacity to lay a finger on anything in his family’s estate.

“I suppose politics is a subject you two tend to avoid,” remarked Mr Bones, raising his tumbler to his lips. “That right, Nott?”

“On the contrary, Bones, it happens to be one of our favourites,” said Tavaris smoothly, as Hermione perched herself on the arm of his chair, ignoring the watchful gazes on her. He placed his hand on her back, pinching it right where the corset ended; they would be discussing her purchase of a werewolf-sympathetic text later. “Our debates keep our minds fresh. Wouldn’t you agree, darling?”

“They certainly keep things from getting dull.”

Edmund coughed to cover up a snort. Clearing his throat, he twisted on the sofa to face Crouch.

“Let us return to the point. What’s this proposal you mentioned?”

“Yes.” Crouch sat forward, looking (to no great shock) serious. “This past month, I have been drafting a new Bill — one that I believe will assist us with all this *madness*, as you called it — and Merlin knows you’re right. Minchum has my respect; he’s not wary of making the hard choices, nor of the public discontent some of those choices are wont to provoke. Nevertheless, he’s doing a poor job of containing He Who Must Not Be Named’s rise to power.”

“That is to say, he isn’t,” surmised Edmund, miraculously, without smirking.

Much too aggressively for Hermione's taste, Moody placed the photograph of Theodore, Lucius, and Narcissa back on the mantle.

"You'd know all about that, wouldn't you, Lestrange?"

"Alastor," warned Crouch.

"We've seen an undeniable increase in anti-Muggle attacks since Minchum's been in office," said Mr Bones, before that road could be travelled. "To make matters worse, the Muggles and Muggle-borns appear to no longer be his preferred targets; any witch or wizard who speaks out against You-Know-Who's agenda is putting themselves in danger, regardless of their blood status."

Edmund nodded, reluctantly removing his gaze from Moody. "That does appear to be the case, doesn't it? Bellinus Shacklebolt's son is evidence of that much."

Says the man whose own son probably killed him, thought Hermione, suppressing a scoff.

"*Precisely*!" said Crouch emphatically. "Orvyn Shacklebolt illustrated a few sodding cartoons, and look where it's gotten him! My Aurors still haven't found a body, you know, not even remains like the ones we found of Regulus Black last month — and wasn't that a shock? I had to question my own son on the matter. Barty knew nothing, of course."

She winced.

"Neither did that Greengrass girl — the one Regulus Black was reportedly engaged to marry. Devastated, the both of them. A betrayal, Greengrass seemed to feel it was, and rightfully so. They have infiltrated our society, the Death Eaters, and the people are turning on each other out of fear. Don't know who they can trust anymore."

The reservedness of both Tavaris' and Edmund's expressions was admittedly impressive. Edgar's was less convincing, his feigned ignorance ruined by the proximity of his hand to his pocket.

"And what has Minchum done to prevent these attacks?" Crouch continued, with his elbows planted on his knees. "To prevent the clear growth of He Who Must Not Be Named's forces? What about the half-blood children disappearing from St Mungo's, or the files that keep going missing and the department memos that never reach their recipients? I'll tell you what: *nothing*."

"He only added more Dementors to Azkaban," Mr Bones put in, "and as much as I'm in favour of that, it does nothing to help us if we can't fill those cells in the first place."

At last, Moody shifted to face them all fully. He stared hard at Tavaris and Edmund, a sinister glint in his dark, unmagical eyes.

"But we're not looking to just lock them up anymore."

"I see," said Tavaris carefully.

“What is it you’re looking to do, then?” asked Edmund, with a small frown.

Crouch took a large sip of his drink, finishing it, then set his empty tumbler down on the end table.

“The Bill I’ve constructed may very well seem too harsh to the general public,” he said, reaching down to unclasp his briefcase; from its depths, he retrieved a thick sheaf of parchment. “But, whether they like it or not, harshness is what they require of their Ministry at a time like this. In his inaction, Minchum has become a liability. Going forward, I will be the one to make those hard choices; I will be the one to act, starting with this.”

He passed the drafted Bill to Edmund, and silence fell as everyone watched him read the title on the cover. His frown deepening, Edmund flipped to the first page; his eyes flitted across it rapidly, widening ever so slightly at what he found there.

Moody appeared as if he were trying not to grin too broadly.

By the time he reached the third page, Edmund had schooled his expression, but his shoulders remained fraught with tension. A few more minutes passed before he seemed satisfied with his understanding of the Bill. He returned to the cover page and, with stiff movements, handed it to Hermione.

Holding it so that Tavaris, too, could read it, she peered down at the short title.

1980 C-17

The Auror Exception Act

There was a sinking feeling in her stomach, like a stone in water, for she knew what this Bill concerned. Back when Kingsley had been training her on how to navigate the world of magical law, she had pulled a copy of this same draft from the Wizengamot’s archives to study it. Whilst they would keep their true feelings hidden for now, Tavaris and Edmund would be summoning the Dark Lord as soon as Crouch, Moody, and the Boneses took their leave.

And Hermione was wholly unprepared to witness the Dark Lord’s reaction to the authorisation of Auror-cast Unforgivable Curses.

Releasing a long breath, she turned the page. Within seconds, Tavaris’ hand had curled into a fist, bunching up the fabric at the back of her dress; his nails scraped against the corset, thankfully too low to feel the letter there.

“Well,” he said eventually, without lifting his gaze from the draft, “you’re wise to expect some controversy, Crouch. I have no doubt that the Wizengamot will be divided in their stance on the potential enactment of this Bill.”

“Which is why I’ve come here first,” said Crouch. “When I introduce it, I want to have at least sixty percent of the votes already confirmed; I want assurance that it will go through.”

Both Hermione and Tavaris glanced up at him then, and she was sure that, at that moment, they were both thinking the same thing.

He’s a bigger fool than I thought if he came here.

Before either of them (or Edmund) was forced to craft a response, Goppy appeared at the entrance of the room to announce that dinner had been served. As a group, they made their way to the formal dining room, Hermione still holding on to the drafted Bill. As usual, she sat on Tavaris’ left, with Edmund beside her and Crouch and Edgar opposite. Moody stalled for a moment, presumably weighing the risks between having his back to the doors and having to turn his head to see those whom he suspected were Death Eaters, before sitting down next to the latter. Mr Bones, it seemed, was the only one among them brave enough (or perhaps ignorant enough) to take the spot beside Edmund.

Hermione scanned the table, cursing herself for forgetting to adjust the menu; Goppy had served the planned meal from the menu that she had created at the start of the week. The first course was caprese salad, but she knew that within the next twenty minutes, bite-size pieces of grilled chicken drizzled in a lemon and rosemary cream sauce would appear on her plate for everyone to see. It was bad enough that the tomatoes in her salad had been sliced into halves.

“Thank you, Goppy,” she said tightly, as she laid her napkin on her lap. “This looks wonderful.”

Goppy puffed his chest out proudly. “Mistress Mione is very welcome.”

Moody, who seemed to have been taking note of every potential weapon in the room, had already picked up on Hermione’s lack of knives. The wine, she had also been excluded from, and, with a glance at where the draft had been set down between Tavaris and herself, she decided that simply would not do.

“Would you mind grabbing another goblet, please? I think it’s safe to say I can drink again now, if only sporadically.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

Goppy was gone for under ten seconds before he returned with the goblet, and the *pop* of his second Disapparation muffled the sound of Hermione’s thanks.

“So, sixty percent confirmed,” said Edmund, picking up his outermost fork and knife to slice one of his tomatoes, “is that the percentage of individual stances you want confirmed or the percentage of votes in favour?”

“Ideally, the latter,” said Crouch.

“But we’re aware that it will be close,” said Mr Bones rationally, “whether the Bill goes through or not.” He took a sip of wine from his goblet, Chardonnay, for the white meat and its citrus dressing. “But should it be the former — say, we have forty percent who have confirmed their intention to vote in favour, but twenty percent who have confirmed otherwise — then we’ll know to speak to more seat-holders before introducing the Bill.”

Tavaris flipped the draft open to take a more in-depth look. His left hand drifted down the pages, his forefinger trailing each line that he read, meanwhile his right hand worked on his salad. A crease appeared between his eyebrows, and it did not go away as he reached the first set of clauses, reciting them to himself in a voice that was nearly a murmur.

“‘*One, any individual employed by the British Ministry of Magic’s Auror Office; two, shall be hereby exempt from the legal repercussions of casting any of the three identified Unforgivable Curses, named as they are, the Imperius Curse, the Cruciatus Curse, and … the Killing Curse …*’”

“For what purpose would the Aurors be casting the Cruciatus?” asked Edmund, succeeding in looking nonplussed. “Or the Imperius, for that matter?”

“For interrogation, of course,” said Crouch, as though this should have been obvious. “We’ve managed to temporarily detain over a dozen suspects in the last two years alone, but no official arrests can be made if we have no proof.”

“And your solution is torture?”

“Why shouldn’t it be? If the Death Eaters have no qualms about using those methods on us, then levelling the playing field demands that we use them ourselves.”

“Fighting fire with fire won’t help you put out the flames,” said Hermione.

Edgar met her gaze steadily.

“No, but it may stop the other side from adding fuel.”

“It will if they know what’s good for them,” said Crouch confidently. He gestured to Tavaris with his fork. “Keep reading.”

Hermione grabbed the carafe on the table and filled her goblet nearly to the brim.

“‘*... three,*’” Tavaris continued, flexing his jaw slightly, “‘*on any individual under suspicion of association with at least one member of the unsanctioned league of radicals known as Death Eaters, or; four, seen engaging in any illegal activity alongside them …*’” He paused, putting down his fork and exchanging it for his goblet.

Her lips moving soundlessly, Hermione repeated the clause to herself, then shook her head; there was something wrong with it.

“Would you happen to have a quill in that briefcase of yours, Mr Crouch?”

“Mm.” Crouch swallowed his most recent bite, then reached into his briefcase, once again at his feet. He took out a quill and handed it to her. “Self-Inking.”

“Brilliant, thank you,” she said, dragging the draft closer to herself. “Am I correct in assuming you have more copies of this?”

She waited for Crouch to nod before lowering the quill to the page and drawing a neat line through the entire third clause.

At the same time, both Crouch and Mr Bones sat forward in their seats.

“What on earth are you —?”

“Lady Nott, I beg your pardon —”

“You cannot give Aurors permission to use Unforgivables on someone who’s no more than a mere suspect,” said Hermione unsympathetically, cutting them off before they could voice their dispute. “You said it yourself, Mr Crouch, people are turning on each other; they don’t know who they can trust anymore. Including this clause would lead to a rise in civilian deaths, and the Ministry would be at fault for every one of them.”

“I can see how you might come to that conclusion,” said Crouch, with forced patience, “but —”

“You want the public on your side, don’t you?”

“Be that as it may, Lady Nott —”

“As Head of the D.M.L.E., it is your responsibility to keep the citizens of wizarding Britain safe. No one would vote for a Minister who allowed innocent people to be killed by their own members of Law Enforcement.”

Crouch’s nostrils flared.

“Now,” said Hermione briskly, beginning to write in the margins, “what the third clause should say is, ‘*on any previously identified participant or individual seen engaging in illegal activity alongside at least one member of the unsanctioned league of radicals known as Death Eaters.*’” She took a sip of wine as she moved on, marking the fifth clause as the fourth. “‘*... if only cast as means of criminal interrogation, to ensure detainment, or at any point in which* …’ No, that won’t do.”

“You plan on letting your wife disrespect her Head of Magical Law Enforcement like this, Nott?” Moody demanded. He had yet to touch either his salad or his wine. “By deliberately rewriting his entire Bill?”

“One does not simply *let* my wife do anything, Auror Moody.” Tavaris’ tone was goading. “She’s far too recalcitrant for that.”

Hermione nearly smiled, and that itself came as a surprise; *recalcitrant* had been the word used most frequently to describe her when she had begun hounding the Wizengamot with her

own proposals, either by the media or by the seat-holders themselves. She allowed herself to sink into her self-appointed task, basking in the near high that was being, for the first time in a long time, completely in her element.

This was what she loved.

“Forgive me for saying this, Lady Nott, but you have no experience with these affairs,” said Mr Bones, not unkindly. “As I understand it, you have received no further education or training since your N.E.W.T.s.”

“Which was almost two years ago now,” added Edgar, sounding somewhat suspicious.

“Just because you have no record of any additional education or training, sir, does not mean that I have not received it,” said Hermione breezily, without looking up.

“Mione’s taken to reviewing my work in her spare time,” Tavaris elaborated, lying through his teeth. “She spent the duration of her pregnancy studying magical law — under my guidance, of course. I did achieve a Mastery in it if you recall. You’ll find that she knows what she’s talking about.”

Edmund made a sound of agreement as he chewed.

“You implied earlier that you were making the rounds with this,” he said, after swallowing. “Who have you spoken to so far?”

“You two are the first,” said Crouch. “I shared the draft with Martin only this morning, and Edgar and Alastor read it this afternoon, shortly before I contacted you both.”

“A meeting with Ignatius Prewett and Algernon Longbottom has been scheduled for tomorrow,” said Mr Bones. There was a soft *clinking* as he set down his cutlery. “And we’ll be seeing Oswald Macmillan and Leon McKinnon shortly thereafter, once the latter’s returned from a conference in Berlin.”

“Well, I think I speak for both of us when I tell you we’re honoured to have been first on the list. Might I inquire as to why, though?” Edmund’s voice was full of feigned nonchalance. “Just out of curiosity.”

More cutlery was set down.

“This Bill will be controversial, there’s no doubt about that,” Crouch said matter-of-factly. “It has the potential to be perceived as not only harsh but *too* harsh. Therefore, by first gaining the approval of those who aren’t wary of using a more forceful approach, it will be easier to convince those who are. Their opinions will be swayed by those of their peers.”

“I can certainly see the logic in that.”

“There’s nothing in here about the legal and moral repercussions of an Auror casting an Unforgivable on an innocent party.” Hermione raised her head to look at Crouch, holding the quill aloft. “Respectfully, sir, setting boundaries is pointless if there’s no punishment for crossing them.”

Crouch rubbed his temple, as though he could feel a headache coming on.

It was not until after nine o'clock that they even began wrapping up, and not one page of the draft had been spared from Hermione's editing. In that time, two more courses had been served, followed by a large cheese board, and two more carafes of wine had been drained, none of which had been consumed by Moody, who claimed to have already eaten. No one believed him, of course, but they didn't bother to call him out on it. At Tavaris' request, a copy of the edited draft was made by means of a Doubling Charm; so that they could study it further, he claimed, but everyone barring Crouch and Mr Bones knew it was so that the Dark Lord could. He wasn't called out on his lie, either.

"Well, then?" Crouch said brusquely as they all gathered before the front doors. He took his cloak when Goppy held it out for him, offering no thanks, and drew it over his shoulders as he looked expectantly from Tavaris to Edmund. "Can I count on your votes when the time comes?"

Hesitating, Tavaris and Edmund exchanged an inscrutable look. A silent conversation seemed to take place between them, communicated entirely through small facial twitches and the odd tilt of a head.

"I wouldn't put your Galleons on it," Moody told Crouch gruffly.

Mr Bones shook his head in exasperation.

"Now, see here, Alastor," Crouch said, sounding fed up as he turned to face Moody properly. He pointed a reprimanding finger at him. "Whatever you may think, I am no fool. I have known Nott for over half my life; I know he and Lestrange subscribe to certain ideologies far older and far more traditional than I do, you don't need to tell me that. He Who Must Not Be Named and his followers, however, have taken those ideologies and they've twisted them into something else — something *Dark*. These two here are proud of their beliefs, and they do not enjoy having them tainted. *They are not the radicals you think they are*."

Moody clenched his jaw, his right eye twitching.

"Consider this: would one of *them* marry a witch whose views are anything like Lady Nott's?"

Every pair of eyes landed on Hermione. Uncomfortable, she began to fidget with the copy of the draft in her hands, gradually coming down from the high that had been editing it. Tavaris placed his hand on her shoulder, stilling her.

"Take my word for it or don't," Crouch went on peremptorily, "but as your superior, I recommend that you do."

Moody squared his shoulders, saying nothing and glaring at Tavaris and Edmund over Crouch's head. Edgar, meanwhile, looked rather disappointed in Crouch, as though he had expected more from him, or had at least hoped for it.

Turning back round, Crouch raised his eyebrows, waiting with what was clearly a limited amount of patience. This time, Hermione understood Tavaris and Edmund's private exchange, because this was a situation that she had grown exceptionally adept at recognising. They had no choice; *yes*, was the only word that would keep them out of trouble now.

"When you bring the Bill before the Wizengamot," Edmund told Crouch, with an air of reluctant finality, "you will have our support."

"Our votes are yours," Tavaris confirmed.

Crouch gave them a business-like nod. "You know who to speak to, then," he said, picking up his briefcase. "Spread the word. Covertly, mind you."

"Of course."

"Avery, Mulciber, Travers, Rosier … Cygnus Black … that whole crowd is much more likely to listen to the two of you than they are myself. And anything *you* agree to, Tavaris, I have faith Malfoy will as well."

Tavaris' smile looked painful.

"To deny that would be a waste of breath. You can count on Abraxas's vote, too, Barty."

"Splendid. Thank you for the lovely meal, Lady Nott —" with a rueful smile, Crouch held up his briefcase, "— and for all your helpful input."

"I'm happy to help," said Hermione. "Give my regards to your wife."

"I will." With a nod to Tavaris and Edmund each, Crouch added, "Goodnight," and marched out the doors, held open by Goppy's will alone.

Mr Bones stepped forwards, his eyes crinkling with the small smile he gave Hermione.

"Thank you for accommodating our intrusion this evening, Lady Nott," he told her, before turning to Tavaris and Edmund. "Rest assured that your support has not gone unappreciated."

He made to leave, and Hermione found herself speaking before she realised that she had even opened her mouth.

"Would you say hello to Amelia for me, Mr Bones?"

"Why, of course, Lady Nott," said Mr Bones, his smile widening. "You have my word."

"Yes," said Edgar softly. He was not looking at her, but rather the vase of royal lilies. "We'll be sure to tell her."

He met Hermione's gaze, and she knew that he was not talking about his sister.

"Tell her I'm sorry for not writing," Hermione could have said then; "I'm not very good at managing my post." But Tavaris also knew that it was not Amelia to whom Edgar was

referring, and his hand had tightened on her shoulder in warning, so she said nothing at all.

Without another word, Edgar followed his father out, and only Moody remained.

“I was hoping you could clear something up for me, Lady Nott.”

Hermione glanced up at Tavaris, who appeared as though he were seconds away from drawing his wand. Beside him, Edmund’s hand was already resting in his pocket. She swallowed, looking back at Moody.

“By all means, Auror Moody.”

“Your son — Theodore, is it?”

Apprehensive, she was slow to nod.

As if in anticipation, Moody leaned in, and the look that he fixed her with was disconcerting, his grin sharp and full of teeth.

“Has he said his first words yet?” he whispered.

“He’s not even three months old,” said Hermione uneasily, confused as to where he was going with this. “Babies don’t typically say their first words until they’re one, so … no, he hasn’t.”

Moody’s grin turned somehow sharper.

“Not even a little hiss?”

It took a beat, but then her heart slammed into her chest, and she reared back to stare up at him with wide, horrified eyes. Tavaris’ fingers dug deeper into her shoulder.

“You may have Crouch convinced but you can’t fool me,” Moody said, straightening again and looking at all three of them in turn.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” said Edmund. His expression was mockingly confused, but his voice was frigid.

“I know what you are,” snarled Moody, “and one day, so will everyone else. The only question is whether that’ll be because your masks slipped … or because you found yourselves the unlucky sods at the wrong end of my wand.”

“I believe your party is waiting for you, Auror Moody,” said Tavaris coldly. “Goodnight.”

Huffing a mirthless laugh, Moody backed away, making his way to the doors.

“Have fun informing your master what you agreed to tonight, boys,” he taunted, and with that, he was descending the stone steps after the others, and Goppy let the doors swing shut.

The ensuing silence was deafening. Hermione, Tavaris, and Edmund stood motionless as Goppy hustled into the formal dining room to begin tidying up, all three of them staring at the doors. Hermione clutched the edited draft of Crouch's Bill tightly, crinkling the parchment. She thought she might have stopped breathing.

After what must have been nearly a minute, Edmund said faintly, "We're fucked."

"So *spectacularly* fucked," said a drawling voice from somewhere above them. She spun round so fast that she made herself dizzy and looked up at the stairwell; peering down at them from behind the bannister were Abraxas and Lucius. "I can't even sufficiently put into words how absolutely fucked you two are."

"I hope your wills are in order," said another voice, this one much closer. Hermione jerked her head back down to see Elias Avery slipping out of the informal dining room and turning into the hall, Geoffrey Mulciber close behind him.

"At least you've got an heir now, Tavaris," the latter said.

"I suppose I should tell Mother not to expect you home tonight, Father?"

Yet again, she turned on the spot, her heart frantic. The black spots that she had grown so familiar with clouded the outskirts of her vision, like a dark, bluish fog creeping in at the crack of dawn.

Rodolphus' upper-body hovered unnaturally at the threshold of the formal dining room, his wand held in mid-air as a Disillusionment Charm melted away, revealing the rest of him. Not a moment later did Gaspar and Angus step out of the study.

Evidently, Tavaris and Edmund had prepared for the worst-case scenario.

"How come Crouch gave his proposal to the two of *you*?" Abraxas said bitterly, his walking-stick held horizontally in his grasp as he and Lucius ventured down the stairs. "Where was my invite?"

"Crouch hates you, Abraxas. That's not new information."

"You'll have to be a bit clearer, Edmund, I'm not familiar with the language you're speaking."

Lucius sniggered.

"And you just *had* to promise him my vote, didn't you, Tavaris?"

"Tavaris?" Hermione said, in a small, wavering voice. She let go of the draft with one hand to tug on his robes, drawing his attention. "What did Moody mean by that? About Theodore?"

Another hush fell over the hall, which did nothing to settle her nerves. Without saying anything, Tavaris slid his hand from one shoulder to the other and pulled her into his side. The world seemed to tilt on its axis; swaying, she staggered closer, bunching the fabric of his robes into a fist.

“Tell me he wasn’t implying what I think he was.”

There was no answer to be gained from Tavaris’ expression. Hermione blinked hard, trying to will away the spots that were steadily expanding, becoming increasingly opaque. As if she were listening from underwater, she heard someone say, “We need to summon him.”

The world tilted once more, then began to spin; she squeezed her eyes shut, pressing her forehead into Tavaris’ chest. She felt like she might be sick at any moment, her head heavy and light at the same time, her skin cool yet overheated. Both of her hands were now clinging to his robes for balance, and she wondered what had happened to the draft. Every quick, shallow breath that she took screamed at her to take the corset off. Why did she have it on, anyway? She could not remember, but whatever the reason was, it seemed silly now.

The spinning increased as strange, pained noises sounded from all around, like a warped choir of hisses and grunts, and Hermione felt herself slipping, perhaps going sideways. There was a clatter nearby, and her feet no longer seemed to be on the floor. Was it her imagination, or was her heart truly beating against her ears?

“He can’t already know, can he?” she heard past the thundering of her pulse, and then she was consumed by the fog, and could hear nothing at all.

*

It felt as though not even a second had passed before Hermione was roused by the faint breeze of Goppy fanning her face. She blinked a few times, sluggishly hoisting herself up to find that she had been brought to her bedroom.

“Mistress is needing water,” Goppy told her seriously, dropping the fan onto the bedside table, where there was both a goblet and a large pitcher of water. He filled the goblet hurriedly, then tried to lift it to her mouth. “Drink, Mistress.”

Hermione leaned back against the headboard, her head pounding, and took the goblet from him. Before the water could reach her lips, however, her reason for being there came rushing back; the goblet slipped through her slackened grasp as she hunched over, gagging.

“No,” she muttered to herself, almost feverishly.

Goppy made a noise of distress, grabbing the goblet before her dress or the bed could be further soaked by its contents.

She shook her head, breathless.

“No … They can’t … They *can’t*.”

Her eyes found the framed photographs on the other bedside table, and then she was crawling across the mattress to reach them, ignoring Goppy’s protests. She picked up the one of the Potters, her eyes darting from each laughing face to the next. The corset seemed to tighten of its own accord, making her lungs restrict, unable to gather enough oxygen.

They could not truly believe that, could they? Those laughing faces could not truly believe what Moody had implied, right?

"*Please*," Goppy begged from behind her, "you is not *well*, Mistress. You must drink — oh," he added abruptly, his voice very high. Further abrupt was the small *pop* of Disapparation that followed.

Hermione did not bother turning to confirm that he was gone; she could not breathe. Dropping the photograph onto the mattress beside her, she began struggling frantically with the buttons at the back of her dress, desperate to reach the ties of the corset. She was panting by the time she managed to get them undone, the top of the dress pooling in her lap and Regulus' letter discarded on the bed. With all her might, she hurled the corset across the room.

The air was cool against her bare skin; shivering, she stuffed her arms back into the sleeves of the dress. As she started once more on the buttons, however, she was distracted by the sight of the letter, no longer entirely crisp or white and now laying atop the Potters in their frame.

It was the same size.

Hermione abandoned her buttons halfway through the task to take apart the frame. As fast she could, she slid the letter with Sirius' name on it behind the photograph, then fit the backing into place and returned the frame to the table. It was just in time, too, for Goppy reappeared the moment she had, twisting his hands anxiously.

"Goppy is so sorry, Mistress," he said regretfully, gazing up at her with large, imploring eyes, "b—but Master Tavaris orders Goppy to fetch Mistress Mione straight away."

She had a fraction of a second to feel confused before he was seizing her by the wrist and yanking her off the bed, dragging them both into a narrow tunnel that lacked in noise just as much as it lacked in colour; there was no air, the corset paling in comparison to the walls now closing in, and she was spinning, faster and faster until, suddenly, she wasn't. Her feet hit the floor just as her knees gave out, and she toppled forwards to steady herself against the nearest thing she could find, feeling like she might faint again.

"*For fuck's — go*, Goppy, get out of my sight!" That was Tavaris speaking, she realised dimly, her eyes squeezed shut as she caught her breath. The person who took her arm, too, was him, and she was pulled left and back, drawn onto the thigh of his good leg and hitting the side of her own against what she guessed was the arm of his chair.

"Is she well?" asked a lilting voice, dripping with disdain. *Bellatrix,* Hermione thought, and her eyes shot open, promptly widening in alarm, so many warning bells going off inside her head that it made her ears ring shrilly. Her whole body stiffened, dark smudges fading from her vision to bring the room into harsh relief, the quiet of it purposeful, untampered by her dizziness.

When Hermione had wished for a seat at the table once more, she had not meant this one.

She was now in the middle of the large, candlelit Great Hall at the second Nott property, sitting at the formal dining room's outrageously long table, every seat of which was occupied by a different face, some of them ranging from eager to curious or wary, and others determinedly blank. Opposite her sat Snape, Abraxas, Lucius, a sneering Bellatrix, a glaring Dolohov, Corban Yaxley, the Averys, the Mulcibers, Landon Crabbe, Garfield Goyle, Creighton Rosier, Wymond and Lancaster Selwyn, a man with a narrow, rat-like face whom she didn't know and a burly man with a black moustache whom she did: Walden Macnair, future executioner for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.

"Fainting spell," Tavaris muttered distractedly, his hands warm on Hermione's back. She stiffened further, pushing away from the table to press herself closer to him as, madly, he did up the remaining buttons of her dress. "Forgive me for the delay, my Lord, it won't happen again."

"For your sake, Tavaris, I should hope not."

Hermione turned her head reluctantly; on her right, sat at the head of the table less than a foot away, was the Dark Lord.

"I don't care if she's unconscious," he sneered at Tavaris, a dark look upon his pale face, "in the middle of a meal, or bathing, or *feeding her son* — when I request her brought to me, I expect you to *bring her to me*."

She flinched, turning away again. Moody's taunting question repeated itself in her head and when, the last button done, Tavaris wrapped an arm around her middle and dragged her back against his chest, she stayed put gladly.

"Yes, my Lord," was his hushed reply.

The Dark Lord's voice changed, growing louder, more powerful, as he addressed the room at large.

"I'm sure you are wondering why I have summoned you all here tonight. Wonder no more, for I seek to inform you of a matter that has just been brought to my attention …"

Hermione's gaze continued its path around the table. On Macnair's right sat a man and woman whom, like the man on his left, she did not know; the man had the appearance of a villain's henchman from a tacky action film, whereas the woman had sleepless eyes and a curl to her upper lip. Next was Morcant Bulstrode, whom Hermione now knew must have been Marked.

At the other head, opposite the Dark Lord, was a dandy-looking wizard whose face she had only previously seen in a grayscale photograph on the inside of a book cover. It was Argo Pyrites, the author of *Alchemy, Ancient Art and Science*, one of the many books she had pored over in her first year at Hogwarts whilst scavenging for information on the Philosopher's Stone. On the later edition held by the Hogwarts library in 1991, the short biography that accompanied his photograph had noted his death in 1981, and now she could guess as to how he had died.

It felt a little like betrayal to see him present among the members of the Inner Circle. She had liked that book.

To die or not, *Nineteen.*

"... no more than an inconvenience … a minor obstacle in our quest for greater power … Alas, it is nonetheless one that requires immediate addressing, and for which a swift resolution must be made and acted upon …"

On Pyrite's other side, moving back up the table, sat yet another two people whom Hermione had never seen before: a dark-haired man who also resembled a henchman and a woman who had her nose stuck in the air. Beside them were Emil Flint (another whose Mark was now confirmed) and Amycus, Alecto, and Elric Carrow, followed by Maverick Jugson — a wizard with a heavy-set jaw and an even heavier brow who had hit Hermione with an Impediment Jinx during the Battle of the Department of Mysteries — and Healer Gibbon and her pointy-nosed husband, Brinley Gibbon. He would be struck down by Thorfinn Rowle in the Battle of the Astronomy Tower, with a Killing Curse intended for Remus. Coincidentally, it was Thorfinn who filled the seat on Brinley's right.

"... most irritating is the fact that our greatest enemies have already been made aware of the situation. I can say with the utmost certainty that Dumbledore, the old fool, is taking action as we speak …"

Raucous jeering and spat vitriol greeted the mention of Professor Dumbledore, several people banging their fists emphatically against the surface of the same table Hermione had eaten Christmas dinner at. She felt a pang of sympathy for the Narcissa of the future.

Thorfinn's father, Gerlach, was in the next seat, the banging of his fist exceptionally enthusiastic. Lachlan and Eamon Travers succeeded him, the latter's lip curling in disdain when he caught her looking at him. Nearing the end of the table at which the Dark Lord governed, climbing in rank, were Rodolphus and Edmund.

"... have no fear, my faithful, for this shall not impede us, nor shall it impede our rise. Lord Voldemort cannot be felled. Not by Dumbledore or his misguided enthusiasts, and certainly not by a matter so trivial … so inconsequential …"

Finally, on her immediate left, there sat a wizard with curly, rust-coloured hair and a pockmarked face, who, rather than watching the Dark Lord, was already looking directly at her.

It was Augustus Rookwood, the spy within the Department of Mysteries.

Hermione very nearly shrieked. As it was, she still let out a gasp that was far too loud, jolting back as though she had been bodily shoved and, for the second time, hitting her leg on the arm of Tavaris' chair.

The Dark Lord paused.

“Ah, yes,” he said after a moment. “Our friend Rookwood is not very pleasant to look at, is he, Lady Nott? His mind, however … Well, I believe even you would enjoy discovering what it has to offer.”

She tried not to squirm, clinging to Tavaris arm where it pinned her to him. Rookwood’s facial scarring was nothing compared to the shrewdness of his gaze.

“*Look at me*.”

His impatience was so loud that her head snapped to him fast enough for her neck to crick; the heat of the strain rushed up the back of her head, painful yet easy to ignore as she met the Dark Lord’s gaze.

“It is *I* who should be holding your attention right now.”

Unable to find her voice, she jerked her head in response.

He returned his gaze to the others, letting it trail down and around the table; it lingered on Snape for a split second longer than anyone else, but when he spoke again, it was to all of them.

“This afternoon at the Hog’s Head Inn, Albus Dumbledore held a series of interviews for two teaching positions to be made available at Hogwarts upon the end of the current term, in light of the impending retirement of both Horace Slughorn and Morgana Gadaric, the exceptionally tactless Divination professor.”

A nauseating cold spread itself across Hermione’s skin and sank into her flesh, reminiscent of the unshakeable chills of a ruthless fever. Her heart descended gradually, dreadfully, into the pit of her stomach, her face going rapidly bloodless.

“Greasy Mr Snape is having business elsewhere today, Mistress.”

So deeply had she longed for the end of this war, so restlessly had she awaited it, yet here she was, witnessing that end’s beginning, and wishing hopelessly that it could be further away.

“If not for Severus’ presence, we would have found ourselves put at a disadvantage in this quest that the weak-willed call *war*.” The Dark Lord sighed slightly in mocking exasperation, as if he thought this could be called anything other than war when he himself had been the one to declare it.

Snape was perched tall on his chair, his posture so pompous and his sallow face so smug, so expectant of praise, that it made Hermione sick.

He has no idea what he’s just done.

“You see, Severus had the foresight to listen in on the interview of the sole Divination hopeful — Sybil Trelawney, a descendant of the Seer Cassandra Trelawney.”

Rookwood and Dolohov were the first to visibly cotton on — to get even an inkling as to where the Dark Lord might be leading them with this tale. Suspicion reached Tavaris next,

Hermione thought, because she felt his head turn as he shot a glance at Rookwood. Only a second later, Pyrites' eyes widened greedily. He leaned forwards, placing his clasped hands on the table; he was wearing a pair of white silk gloves that were stained with blood — whose, she could only wonder.

The Dark Lord had yet to even say it — had yet to say that pivotal word which would bring about the taking of two young lives and the irreversible destruction of two more — but Hermione could already taste the defeat on her tongue.

"The interview was interrupted," he continued, appearing to relish in the mounting anticipation of his followers, "when Sybil Trelawney proved herself to be a true possessor of the Inner-Eye. *Indeed*," he added deeply, nodding at the understanding which seemed to suddenly dawn on several more of them at once, "a prophecy has been made today."

Significant looks were exchanged around the table. Rookwood was the first to speak, his gaze alight with hunger.

"To whom does this prophecy refer, my Lord?"

The Dark Lord spread his arms slowly, his chin rising imperiously and the barest of smirks playing at his lips.

"Why, who other than Lord Voldemort would have a place in history so transcendent as to have it prophesied?"

The words, "Only you, my Lord," were spoken by so many reverent voices at the same time, one would never be able to discern which voice belonged to whom. Bellatrix's heavily-lidded eyes positively gleamed, and she let out a gleeful, breathless laugh.

"My Lord, you know the Notts have awaited the return of Salazar Slytherin's blood since there was a return to be made," Tavaris said, and it sickened Hermione further to hear that he, too, was breathless. "But *this* … a *true* prophecy …"

The Dark Lord's arms lowered gradually to rest on those of his high-backed chair: Tavaris' chair.

"Do I detect surprise in your voice, Tavaris?"

"No, my Lord," said Tavaris at once. "Merely amazement. To be alive in this time and to witness your power with my own eyes begets nothing short of that."

The Dark Lord appeared appeased. His smirk growing more prominent, he shifted his gaze to Hermione.

"And you, Lady Nott?" he teased. "Has Lord Voldemort succeeded in amazing *you*?"

She was unable to look him in the eye this time, even if her words rang true. "Never in my wildest, most fantastical dreams did I imagine I'd be here to witness such a monumental historical moment."

His chuckle made her feel as though she were back in the parlour at Malfoy Manor, being informed of the fate that awaited her, her heart heavy with shame and her body sagging with defeat.

“Now, in addition to myself, there is another to whom the prophecy refers, theirs a name so insignificant that it was deserving of no mention … no title … So insignificant, their name, that it has yet to even be decided upon … Severus, if you would.”

“It would be an honour, my Lord,” said Snape, like the naive fool he currently was. His deep inhale was one of forcibly restrained excitement. “I was only able to overhear the first part of the prophecy before my presence was discovered, but it is enough to ascertain the crux of it, enough for us to act upon.”

“Discovered?”

“You half-wit! By Dumbledore?”

“Enough with the build-up — get on with it, Snape!”

“It spoke of a child born at the end of July,” Snape forged on, undeterred and unwitting, “to those who have thrice defied the Dark Lord. The prophecy claims that this child shall have the power to vanquish him.”

And just like that, Harry was going to be an orphan and Neville was going to be raised by his grandmother.

The ensuing uproar was instantaneous.

“A *child*?”

“Inconceivable!”

“As if a child could defeat our Lord!”

“Get your ears checked, half-blood, you heard wrong!”

“That’s his filthy Muggle blood talking —”

There need not have been a call for silence, for the moment the Dark Lord stood, all shouting ceased. Even so, the bated breath was loud.

“Severus tells the truth. But understand that any concern this may cause you is unprecedented, for you have already been given my assurance that this prophecy shall not impede us. You have each of you put your faith in me, and I ask now for your continued trust as your master tells you that faith shall never be in vain.” His voice rose, yet deepened, and took on a tone so sure and commanding that his ability to maintain a captivated audience was no cause for surprise. “It matters not what power this unborn child has been prophesied to possess. No power is greater than that of Lord Voldemort.”

His followers were nodding their heads now, some of them going as far as to cheer. There were exclamations of praise, declarations of unwavering worship, and proclamations of a battle soon to be won. Their faith in him was something to be marvelled at, as well as studied by a team of social scientists.

“This child shall be found and its threat eliminated before it has the chance to be anything more than simply that: a child.”

“The child shan’t even be born if I can make it so, my Lord!”

Bile rose in Hermione’s throat, and she forced it back down, a bitter taste in her mouth. She glanced sidelong at Healer Gibbon. It was strange; with the exception of Dolohov, Hermione had never actually had the desire to kill anyone before now.

“That’s *sick*!” she hissed. “How dare you call yourself a Healer, you hideous excuse for a human being!”

Healer Gibbon’s jaw dropped. Both Averys snickered, meanwhile Abraxas snorted loudly, then tried to disguise it by coughing into his fist.

Tavaris pinched her side. “Now is not the time, Mione.”

“Yes, Mione,” mocked the Dark Lord; “now is not the time.”

Wisely, Hermione forced herself to lean back and lower her gaze. For a moment, she flexed her jaw, pursing her lips to keep herself from saying more, then, in a display of rather poor self-control, extended one hand to lay it on the table before her, exactly where, were the table set, there would have been a knife.

Her meaning was clear.

Dolohov sneered at her.

“I’m afraid it will not be so simple, *Healer* Gibbon.” The Dark Lord began to circle the table at a slow, even pace. “Assuming that *those who’ve thrice defied me* are members of Dumbledore’s Order, it is of high probability that he will beat us to identifying them, in which case he will undoubtedly seek to hide them from me. What our *poor*, *trusting* headmaster does not know, however, is that when he discovers who this child’s parents are, so shall we.”

He stopped behind Bellatrix, allowing himself a dark grin.

“You see, your master has recently acquired a very special informant. By this time next week, a member of the Order of the Phoenix shall bear my Mark.”

Hermione would not have been surprised if they began applauding him for his supposed excellency.

“When Dumbledore succeeds in identifying those unfortunate souls, my spy will come running to give up their names! However,” the Dark Lord went on, continuing down the

table, “this does not mean that we should sit idly by in the meantime. After all, the triumphant never triumphs if idle. So, my faithful, I now ask you to think, and to observe. In the coming weeks, you shall work to identify who, among the Order or otherwise, might fit the terms of this prophecy.”

“My traitor cousin’s been spotted skulking about with the McKinnon brat, my Lord,” Bellatrix piped up promptly. “Perhaps the scum’s knocked her up!”

“If this is true, my Lord,” said Eamon, “I beg you for the privilege to do away with her.”

As if they were claws, Hermione dug her nails into the table and dragged them harshly along the wood, her eyes stinging fiercely.

“As if *you’ve* the right, Travers!” cried Bellatrix. “It is *my* bloodline this concerns!”

“Either of the Prewett boys got someone?” Goyle asked the table at large.

“With *their* hair? Be serious.”

“Piss off, baby Malfoy, it’s not a bad guess. Just look at their sister — I’d wager those boys are far from impotent.”

“Augusta Longbottom’s boy just got married, didn’t he?” said Rosier. “And his wife’s in the Order with him!”

Hermione’s hand spasmed violently; she drew it back quickly, swallowing past the lump in her throat. *Don’t react,* she told herself firmly, but remaining passive was not something that she had ever been very good at. Still, she tried, and did not dare lift her gaze.

“Yes! Yes, of course!” Gerlach Rowle exclaimed. “They married last summer; it was in the *Prophet*! That’s more than enough time for him to have put a baby in her!”

“If the child is to be born at the end of this coming July, we can expect it’s mother to begin showing in a month’s time,” Healer Gibbon informed everyone. “That will help us to identify any and all potentials.”

“Thrice defied …” Tavaris murmured thoughtfully.

“That’s the hard bit, Nott,” said Macnair. “Everyone in the Order has defied him at least once each — by living, as they seem to think they’ve got the right to.”

“Does daring to breathe the same air as us count as defiance?” Abraxas gave a haughty sniff. “I should think it does.”

“In the case of the Mudbloods, certainly!”

There was a *screech* as someone suddenly shoved their chair back and leapt to their feet, slamming their hand down on the table.

“The Potters!” Gaspar shouted.

Hermione shut her eyes briefly, willing her tears to stay put.

“That’s right, Fleamont Potter’s son married a Mudblood last year. Bloody hell, what was her name?”

Don’t react.

“My Lord, they’ve defied you by turning down your offer to join the cause! They’ve fought against us in more than one skirmish and James Potter never fails to spit vitriol about you whenever they do!”

“Lily Evans — that was the Mudblood’s surname, right, Severus? She’s friends with that *other* Mudblood in our year, Father. You know the one.”

“She was friends with *her*.”

There was a small pause, and then Hermione felt thirty-nine pairs of eyes on her.

“So were Longbottom and Fort— er — other Longbottom.”

“Hung round with Potter, too, didn’t she, Gaspar? And Black and McKinnon both.”

“Regulus wrote me once that she spent the whole of the holidays with the Mudblood and its family!”

“Yeah, and they were gone for nearly a month ‘cause the stupid Mudblood’s parents got offed by a whatsit called —”

“Car,” said Snape quietly. “It was a car accident.”

“Right, that.”

“Lady Nott,” said the Dark Lord silkily, “might you have any insight with which you can provide us?”

His voice was far too close. Afraid to look, let alone speak, Hermione shook her head.

“Nothing?” He clicked his tongue. “But that’s simply not true, is it?”

“My Lord,” Tavaris spoke up, and to her dread, he turned his head to look behind him, “the letter Lily Potter attempted to send her last December, would that count as an act of defiance, to add to the previous rejection?”

“I should say it does. It was, after all, different from her previous attempts at contact.”

Hermione sucked in a quick breath. *Previous attempts?*

“Precisely, my Lord. It wasn’t simply sent in the post, those stopped after a month. Lily Potter made a deliberate attempt to infiltrate the party held for my son by sending it with one of our guests, this time directly and knowingly defying your wishes.”

“Who delivered the letter for her, Nott?” asked Lachlan Travers, sounding wary.

“That remains unclear. They used a Banishing Charm to pass it along.”

A hand landed on her head, and Hermione seized up, holding her breath. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the black material of the Dark Lord’s robes.

“Are you certain that you have nothing to share with us, Lady Nott?”

She inclined her head the barest amount, a shiver running down her spine as the Dark Lord’s hand smoothed down the back of her head, almost as if he were petting her.

“Pity. Your input would have been most helpful.”

The second his hand left her, she shuddered. Silence reigned once more as he returned to his seat.

“The details of this prophecy shall not be imparted without my express permission,” he told them all. “From this moment on, I expect you each to keep your eyes peeled and your ears open, and not only where the Order is concerned. This prophecy could apply to many, even those who are not currently in Dumbledore’s service. You shall report any information you may gather directly to myself at the earliest opportunity.”

There was a collective murmur of, “Yes, my Lord.”

“Now, before I dismiss you, I ask that anyone with another matter that should be brought to my attention takes advantage of this meeting to speak now, whether that matter be related to the prophecy or otherwise.”

Someone on Hermione’s left cleared their throat.

“Tavaris and I received an unexpected proposal this evening, my Lord,” Edmund said, failing to keep his apprehension from his voice.

“Go on.”

“We were seconds from calling on you ourselves when we received your summons,” said Tavaris, his arm tightening around Hermione’s waist. She heard him swallow thickly. “Early this evening, my Lord, we were both contacted by Barty Crouch Sr.”

The Dark Lord’s lack of response was more fear-inducing than any potential reply could have been.

“He and a few others visited the Nott Estate with the intention of sharing a piece of legislature he’s recently drafted, hoping to persuade us to vote in favour when he inevitably introduces it to the Wizengamot. Edmund, have you —?”

“Yes, I have it right here.” There was a rustling of robes and parchment, and then Hermione watched the edited draft of Crouch’s Bill be Banished down the table to the Dark Lord.

He drew it closer to himself and peered down at the cover page. Tavaris was so tense beneath her that she would not have been surprised if he had turned to stone.

"'*The Auror Exception Act*,'" the Dark Lord read, his eyes narrowing. He turned the page with unbearable slowness. As he scanned it, his lips thinned, and his brows rose. He turned another page, and a muscle twitched in his jaw.

The temperature of the Hall seemed to drop in the wake of his building fury. No one dared speak.

"These edits …" he said finally, in an eerie drawl, "they are yours … aren't they, Lady Nott?"

"Yes," Hermione whispered.

The sheaf of parchment crinkled where he held it, his knuckles turning white.

"And were they given to Crouch or made after he left?"

"What you have now is a copy of what he left with."

"I see." At last, the Dark Lord looked up, and he had the same coldness in his gaze as he had after Barty told him he had killed Regulus. "Who else was present?"

"Crouch brought —"

"I was not asking you."

"Martin Bones," Hermione said, somewhat shakily, "his son, Edgar … and —" she took a deep breath, hastily wiping under her eye before a stray tear could succeed in its escape, "— and Alastor Moody."

"Several of us were stationed nearby, my Lord," interjected Abraxas. "As a precaution."

"My Lord?" said Bellatrix, with uncharacteristic caution. "Might you share the contents of this Bill with us?"

The Dark Lord leaned back, his jaw clenched and nostrils flaring. The parchment crinkled further, and Hermione wondered if he was going to tear it in two, or else set it on fire. He certainly appeared to be considering it.

After a long moment, he replied, "Crouch plans to give his Aurors the authorisation to use Unforgivable Curses."

Over two-dozen faces drained of colour.

"But — but it shall not pass, shall it?" said Lancaster Selwyn. He looked around at his peers. "There should be enough of us on the Wizengamot to stop it going through, shouldn't there?"

"I'd sooner drop dead than vote in favour of it," said his father.

“We will not let this Bill pass, my Lord,” said Rosier determinedly, to which many swiftly agreed.

“Oh, but it will,” said the Dark Lord. He glanced from Edmund to Tavaris. “Crouch did not leave until he had confirmation of your votes.”

It wasn’t a question. They hung their heads.

“We saw no other answer that would leave us free from suspicion, my Lord,” murmured Edmund. “Forgive us.”

“*Forgive*?”

“We were in the presence of the Head of Magical Law Enforcement, my Lord,” said Tavaris imploringly. “Not to mention the Head of the Improper Use of Magic Office and two members of the Order of the Phoenix, one of whom is an Auror. There was little else we could do without revealing ourselves.”

“Get up, both of you.”

Edmund pushed his chair back to stand, and Hermione rose on weak legs to allow Tavaris to do the same, uncomfortably aware of the fact that she had no shoes on. When Tavaris reached for his walking-stick, the Dark Lord waved his hand and sent it clattering to the floor on the other side of the Hall.

“Come here.”

Limping, Tavaris moved round Hermione to get to the Dark Lord. A pink tinge appeared high on his cheekbones as he struggled to join Edmund on his knees. The Dark Lord turned his chair to face them, leaving the drafted Bill on the table. The sight of him drawing his wand made Edmund flinch.

Unsure of whether she was allowed to sit or not and unable to make eye contact with Tavaris while his head was bowed, Hermione looked to Abraxas for direction; he frowned slightly, then tapped the arm of his chair, so that was where she perched.

“My Lord, Edgar Bones and Alastor Moody were suspicious of us from the moment of their arrival,” Edmund was saying in a rush, “and even if Crouch and the elder Bones ignored the accusations, those thoughts had already been implanted, we couldn’t afford to give them further reason to doubt our —”

“Are you really so foolish as to believe making excuses for yourself will keep you from suffering the consequences of disappointing me, Edmund?” The Dark Lord tilted his head mockingly. “You’ve known me longer than most. One would think you knew better by now.”

“Yes, my Lord, of course, I apol—”

“Tavaris knows when to keep his mouth shut. Of course, as far as I am aware, *your* father never made you spend whole summers under a Silencing Charm.”

The pink in Tavaris' cheeks darkened, but beyond that, he did not react.

"Still, it's a shame you cannot manage the same." The Dark Lord raised his wand, pointing it directly at Edmund, and added cruelly, "Try, won't you?"

The next second, Edmund was convulsing on the floor. He appeared to attempt to keep himself from making a sound, the muscles of his face strained as his back arched like the string of a bow about to let loose an arrow. Bellatrix, when Hermione looked at her, had turned her head pointedly away, so as not to be associated with either of the guilty parties. Rodolphus, too, had his head turned, but he kept twitching as if he were fighting the urge to go to his father, perhaps plead for him to be shown mercy. Abraxas and Lucius, on the other hand, merely looked resigned, although the latter was paler than normal. It made Hermione wonder at the progress he had made in his training over the past month.

About two minutes passed before Edmund screamed. It seemed that was what the Dark Lord had been waiting for, because Edmund was swiftly released from the curse at the sound. Panting, he laid where he had fallen for nearly a minute longer before heaving himself back onto his knees. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth, and he wiped it away roughly, succeeding only in smearing it across his cheek.

"An admirable first attempt," the Dark Lord praised. He scrutinised Edmund for a moment, his gaze unthawed and his controlled breathing dangerously heavy. "I have been good to you, have I not? I have rewarded you for your service, time and time again, and all I have asked for in return is your loyalty."

"*My Lord —*" Edmund's voice cracked horribly.

"Haven't you been listening? I thought I told you not to speak, or am I mistaken?"

No fool, he did not answer.

"Tonight, regardless of your supposedly pure intentions, you acted against me," said the Dark Lord. "You promised your loyalty to another; you promised to vote in favour of a Bill that will give our enemies the freedom to strike down your brothers-in-arms. You, Edmund and Tavaris, have signed their death warrants. That cannot go unpunished. Cowardice is your only excuse, and that is not one Lord Voldemort will accept. Your master is a merciful lord, but that mercy is not endless." He turned his wand over in his hands, then added, "To my side, Bella."

With haste, Bellatrix came to kneel beside his chair. He transferred his wand back to his right hand and placed his left on her head, stroking her hair not unlike how he had Hermione's.

"Rodolphus … take Nott's seat."

"Thank you, my Lord," said Rodolphus weakly, albeit gratefully. He stood and strode down the table. Another tap of Abraxas' finger to the arm of his chair was all that kept Hermione from moving as Rodolphus sat down, his arm brushing against her own.

The Dark Lord continued to pet Bellatrix almost idly. She shivered, not out of fear, but out of something else entirely. It was a hundred times more disturbing than it would have been in the future, had Hermione ever been there to witness what Harry had of them, because in this time, Bellatrix did not possess the deranged and dishevelled appearance of an Azkaban escapee.

She just looked far too young.

“You forget, Edmund,” said the Dark Lord meaningfully, “the gifts I give you can easily be taken away.”

Edmund choked on an inhale. His eyes were wide as they tracked the passage of the Dark Lord’s hand.

“You would not wish to see the end of your bloodline, would you? Rabastan may marry. He may provide an heir where there is none … However, I may also instruct him not to … That depends on you.”

The hand lowered for Bellatrix to kiss, then drew away.

“Good girl. Back to your seat now.”

“Yes, Master,” she whispered, and now her voice, too, was far too young. She scurried back to Lucius’ side, a warm flush lingering on her face and chest.

“Now,” said the Dark Lord, standing up to stalk forwards like the predator he was, “let us see if *you*, Tavaris, can manage to maintain your silence.” He narrowed his eyes, this time truly curious, rather than mockingly so. “I wonder, what will it take for you to break it?”

Spectacularly, the Cruciatus Curse did not.

Hermione found that she could not watch, and instead stared at the calla lilies on a side table behind Snape, listening to the muffled grunts of Tavaris fighting not to make any noise. After the first couple of minutes, chokes and splutters joined them, as though he, like Edmund, was biting his tongue, and now had a mouth filled with blood. She did not know how much time passed before the sound of flailing limbs smacking against wood ceased, but it could not have been more than ten minutes.

Then the Dark Lord tried a different method.

“Come here, Mione.”

Once again, Hermione looked to Abraxas; grimly, he inclined his head. She swallowed another mouthful of bile and stood, and her legs nearly gave out. Her stocking-clad feet slid along the waxed floors as she dragged herself over to the Dark Lord.

Tavaris was struggling to get back on his knees, hissing through his teeth whenever he placed too much weight on his bad leg. He spat on the floor, splattering it with red. Unlike Edmund, however, he did nothing to rid himself of the blood staining his chin.

The Dark Lord looked thoughtfully between him and Hermione. She shook, terrified. It had been nearly twenty-four years since she had been forced to endure the pain of the Cruciatus Curse, and she was unprepared to do so again.

“Don’t look so frightened,” the Dark Lord told her, appearing to have decided upon his course of action. He lifted a hand to finger the pearls strung around her neck; her shaking increased tenfold, for she could imagine how easy it would be for him to wrap those fingers around her throat instead. “I’m not going to hurt you, darling.”

At the same time that her breath caught, Tavaris jolted and lost his balance, his left leg slipping out from under him.

The Dark Lord smiled. As he released her and turned, moving back to his chair, Hermione was again reminded of Moody’s words. She glanced behind her at the table; every Death Eater sat there was watching her closely, and she feared they suspected the same.

She feared they were right.

“Look at me.”

Tavaris’ arms trembled as he hoisted himself back up. He lifted his head, meeting the Dark Lord’s sharpened gaze. Beside him, Edmund swayed.

The Dark Lord did not raise his wand, yet a second later, Tavaris’ eyes glazed over, then widened at a horror that he alone could see. His mouth was gaping open, harsh breaths punching out of him. Hermione could not tell how long it lasted. When the Dark Lord retreated from his mind, Tavaris looked terrified, so terrified, in fact, that he broke his silence.

“No,” he whispered, and it sounded like a plea.

“But can you be sure?” asked the Dark Lord softly.

Inexplicably, Tavaris’ eyes darted to Hermione and back.

“As I said, the gifts I give you all can easily be taken away. Remember that the next time you think to let your cowardice get the better of you.” With that, the Dark Lord rose, grabbed the edited draft of Crouch’s Bill off the table, and swept from the Hall, turning right towards the stairs that led to the wing with the family apartments.

At once, his followers were out of their seats, recognising their dismissal. They murmured to one another as they made their way out to the grand front doors, more than a few of them glancing back at Hermione as they did so. Bellatrix stayed put, her arms crossed over her chest. She, too, was looking at Hermione — glaring, truthfully — while Rodolphus waited for his father to get up from the floor.

“Lucius, go home,” Abraxas said, approaching Tavaris as the three Lestranges departed, Edmund’s steps shaky and staggered. “Tell your mother I’ll be there shortly.”

“Father —”

“Go!” snapped Abraxas.

With an indignant noise, Lucius followed the Lestranges out. Now alone save for Hermione and Abraxas, Tavaris eased himself back to sit on the floor, stretching out his bad leg with a grimace. She felt strangely sorry for him.

“Do you need help getting up?” asked Abraxas, removing his wand from the handle of his walking-stick. He flicked it, Summoning Tavaris’ own walking-stick from the other end of the Hall. He gave it to Hermione to hold.

Tavaris shook his head. “I need —” He broke off with a hiss, trying and failing to stand, his bad leg refusing to support his weight. “Fuck! I need to see — I need to check —”

“All right. Come on.” Abraxas stowed his wand away and heaved Tavaris to his feet, then wrapped an arm around him to keep him upright, for as hard as Tavaris seemed to try, his leg wouldn’t stop giving out.

“Theodore,” he told Abraxas, in a thick, panicked voice. He spat more blood out impatiently, adding to the splatter on the floor. “Theodore, Abraxas, we need to —”

“Then we shall,” said Abraxas readily.

“Why do we need to check on Theodore?” asked Hermione, in a too-high voice.

Rather than answer, Tavaris made a grabbing motion with the hand that was not holding onto Abraxas, unable to properly reach for her. She moved closer so that he could wrap his fingers around her wrist, and then they were spiralling through a dark, airless tunnel to land roughly on the grey carpet of Theodore’s nursery.

As soon as the loud *CRACK* of Apparation dissipated, a shrill cry sounded from the bassinet in the middle of the room. Dinky looked up in alarm as Tavaris shoved himself away from Hermione and Abraxas to stumble towards it.

“Tavaris!” called Hermione, hurrying to his side. “Why does he need to be checked on?”

She peered down at Theodore, her heart hammering against her ribs, but could see nothing wrong with him other than the fact that he was crying. She tossed aside the walking-stick, but her hands were pushed away when she tried to pick him up.

“Open your eyes, dammit!” Tavaris shouted at him, making Theodore cry harder, his eyes squeezed shut and his tiny face crumpling.

“You’re scaring him!”

“Master —”

“Tavaris, what —?”

“*SHUT UP*!” Tavaris roared.

He lifted Theodore up, then tripped, nearly falling. Hermione let out a small scream as Abraxas caught him under the arms, dropping his walking-stick in the process. She rushed to steady Tavaris' hold on Theodore before he dropped him.

"Master Theodore was being asleep!" complained Dinky.

Tavaris ignored them.

"Open your eyes, Theodore. Open your eyes, open your fucking eyes —"

Theodore paused for a large gulp of air, and his eyes opened for a fraction of a second, deep blue and glistening with tears —

Tavaris' whole body sagged with relief. He allowed Hermione to take Theodore away from him and Abraxas to push him onto the armchair, where he slumped further, his bad leg useless as it lay limply in front of him, twitching ever so slightly.

"Blue," he said. "Blue, right?"

Understanding seemed to dawn on Abraxas, and he suddenly looked very tired.

"Yes, Tavaris," he said heavily. "His eyes are blue."

"Like mine?"

Hermione stared.

"Like — like yours," she confirmed haltingly, bouncing Theodore lightly. Her mind travelled to a dark place and, feeling ill, she continued. "It's a bottom-of-the-ocean sort of blue, except it gets lighter around the pupils — more like the surface, when the sun hits it. Yours, exactly."

Looking at her, Tavaris gave a short, breathless laugh that sounded half-delirious.

"I should've known it wasn't real," he said ruefully. "He got your scar all wrong."

Chapter End Notes

Don't worry! Only a handful of chapters are left before the end of the war, and then we can leave some of this darkness behind.

Also, if anyone spots an error or two with the structure of the Bill (and I'm sure there are plenty), forgive me, I have very little knowledge of how these things are meant to be written.

Yellow Grass

Chapter Summary

> There’s a serpent in these still waters, lying deep down
> To that king I will bow, at least for now
> One of these days a-comin', I’m gonna take that boy’s crown
> — A Little Wicked, Valerie Broussard

Chapter Notes

> CW: momentary mention of an eating disorder, briefly implied homophobia, and a rather graphic animal death (you'll be glad for the latter, though).
>
> I think you're going to enjoy this one;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The cupboards of the Nott Estate’s basement kitchen were a honey-coloured wood, partly rusted at the hinges; a faded weave rug that was fraying at the edges, worn with age, rested on the cracked stone floor before the sink; an old radio sat on a wooden stool by the cast iron stove, its music blaring; the copper pots and pans that hung from the ceiling positively gleamed, bathed in the warmth of over a dozen lit candle-brackets.

And behind the island countertop at the very centre, Hermione was dancing.

Held in the crook of her arm was a large steel bowl, full of vanilla frosting that was gradually turning from white to peach to a violent shade of orange as she stirred it with a wooden spoon. All the while, she sang along to a song she had gone far too long without hearing, but had not forgotten.

“*I’m losing all control … My chest is one big hole … Inside you’ll see my soul …*” she twirled, nearly knocking Dinky over as they hastened over to the stove; “*Happy as can be … ‘Cause, babe, you charmed the heart right out of me*!”

“Mistress, yous not even watching it!” Dinky said in distress, seizing a too-big pair of floral oven mitts and hurriedly stuffing their hands into them.

Hermione offered them a sheepish smile over her shoulder as she twirled on, spinning in the opposite direction, winding nearer to where Theodore lay in a small cot beside the counter, rocking side to side and fumbling enthusiastically off-tune with a tiny rattle.

"*You charmed the heart right out of me*," she sang on; "*To my whole life you hold the key —*"

"If Is not here, you be eating foul —"

"*— You cast your spell and suddenly —*"

"— no good, burnt black —"

"*— I cannot forget you*!"

"— sorry excuse for cake!"

"Ah, but you *are* here, Dinky," Hermione said cheerfully. "And aren't I lucky for that?"

Dinky reached in to take the cake out, grumbling irritably under their breath. She caught the words, "Silly," and, "Stubborn," and was quite sure, "Mistress," followed them.

Unbothered, she gave a little skip and began to dance around the cot.

"*You're consuming me*!" she cried to Theodore; "*And now you've torn it quite apart*; *I'll thank you to give me back my heart*!"

His eyes were wide and twinkling as they followed her, his lips curling up at the corners, and then, quite out of nowhere, he was laughing.

Hermione shrieked, springing about a foot into the air and almost dropping the bowl of frosting. She hastily shoved it onto the counter, along with the spoon, and picked Theodore up, her smile broadening impossibly further.

"Oh, Theodore, my Theodore!" A laugh of her own bubbled up in her throat, and when it left her mouth, it was joined by another small, tinkling giggle. "You think my dancing's funny, do you?"

Dinky was jumping up and down in excitement, the round pan of chocolate cake hovering in mid-air above their head.

"Master Theodore laughs! He be laughing, oh, he be laughing!"

Alight with glee, Hermione spun again with Theodore in her arms.

"Dinky must tell Master Tavaris!"

She side-stepped the floating cake when it came drifting toward the island counter, ignored the *pop* of Dinky's Disapparation, and carried Theodore about the kitchen as *You Charmed the Heart Right Out of Me* came to an end and another jazzy Celestina Warbeck song started up.

"*I've got a cauldron full of hot, strong love … And it's bubbling for you*! *Say* Incendio*, but that spell's not hot; As my special witch's brew*! Oh, it's the *singing* you find funny, is it? You

know what, I don't blame you. One of your grandmothers adores this song, and I found it funny when *she* sang it, too."

With another twirl, Theodore squealed, kicking his legs out. His head was raised to look at her, held up all by himself, and there was a big, toothless grin plastered across his face. For the first time ever, his smile was not simply reflex.

"Danced round the kitchen just like this while she did it," Hermione told him impressively, "except she managed to make dinner at the same time, can you believe it? Then again, she's a much better cook than your mum."

Footsteps came stampeding down the stone steps off the informal dining room; Gaspar and Angus appeared at the entrance of the kitchen, peering in with interest.

"We heard you were left unsupervised with the knives," explained the former.

"And that there was cake," added the latter.

"So?" said Hermione. She waltzed Theodore back behind the counter. "It's not for you."

"Oh, come on," said Angus imploringly, as he and Gaspar took up residence on a pair of stools opposite her. He leaned forwards on his elbows, eyeing the cooling chocolate cake. "You're not planning to have that whole thing yourself, are you?"

"Puking it all back up would be a waste of perfectly good cake," said Gaspar.

"I know you two spent nine months watching me regurgitate nearly everything I ate, but that's not exactly a problem anymore," said Hermione, giving Theodore a little bounce that had him giggling again. "Isn't that right, love? Because *you* are no longer twisting my insides into knots just for laughs."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Angus reach for the frosting, and slapped his hand away.

"My sister did that even when she wasn't up the duff," Gaspar said, entirely too casual. "I figured you must, too, otherwise there would be no way you'd fit into that dress."

"It's just high metabolism," Hermione told him, drawing the frosting closer to herself and further away from Angus, "for which I am very grateful." *Because the only exercise I got in this time and the next was either duelling or running for my life.* "And what your sister has is called an eating disorder, Gaspar."

"There's a disorder for that? Aurelia's going to blow her top when I tell her."

She planted a kiss on Theodore's forehead and lowered him back into his cot to free up her hands, then she went searching for a utensil to ice the cake with that was not a knife.

"Bloody hell, don't tell me this is *Celestina Warbeck* you're listening to."

As though the radio had overheard Angus' whinging, there came a break in the music, and the low, sultry voice of the host filled the kitchen.

"*You were just listening to* A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love*, another groovy, Warbeck classic to add a little spice to your Saturday afternoon*."

Angus gave a pleased sigh.

"Ruby Lee. Much better."

Returning to the counter with a spatula, Hermione removed the ring of the circular pan and began icing the cake.

"*For all you darling wizards out there getting tired of your witch's song and dance, as Warbeck is wont to inspire among her female audiences, here's a little something for you … Up next is* Beat Back Those Bludgers, Boys, and Chuck That Quaffle Here*, in honour of Puddlemere United's recent win against the Appleby Arrows — which you'll hear more about if you stay tuned for Quick Quidditch today at three o'clock, GMT.*

"*I'm your host, Ruby Lee, and you're listening to Witching Hour*."

"What are you two doing here, anyway?" Hermione asked, walloping the cake with a great lump of orange frosting. "It's not your day — not even Snape's, because he was here last week."

"Tavaris has someone for us to meet, apparently," said Gaspar. "We don't know much beyond that. Neither of our fathers offered any explanation before sending us over."

She frowned as she smoothed out the frosting, trying to think of who else might be visiting that day. Alas, she had no answer, for she had not yet seen Tavaris and, truthfully, she had been a little lost to herself since getting out of bed that morning, so she could not recall if Dinky had informed her of anything before they had left to start on breakfast.

"Tavaris said he would bring whoever it is down here in a jiffy," Angus added, nodding his head to the beat.

"I seriously doubt he actually used the word, *jiffy*."

Gaspar gave a small huff of amused agreement and idly picked up the copy of that morning's *Prophet* that had been laying on the empty stool beside him.

"*Beat those Bludgers back, boys, and chuck that Quaffle here*," Angus began to murmur under his breath, drumming his hands against the countertop; "*No team can ever best the best of Puddlemere …*"

Presumably by pure chance alone, Theodore started rocking in time with the rhythm, grinning still. With a snort, Angus sang louder, leaning over the cot to grin back.

"*You'll catch that Golden Snitch with the easiest of ease; Grab your Beater's bat and in no time flat; Prove the game is yours to seize*! That's right, you nipper," he added in

encouragement, “Puddlemere for the Cup.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. She suspected it was a tradition universally acknowledged among men who obsessed over any given sport to scam the children in their life into rooting for their preferred team, often by means reminiscent of those of a cult leader on the hunt for wandering souls. Case in point, Rose’s first Chudley Cannons jumper had been purchased before she had even left the womb.

“Your icing is melting off the cake,” Gaspar pointed out.

“I’ll just add more, then,” Hermione said, slathering on another lump of frosting. “I’d rather have melted frosting than suffer the unpleasantness of eating a cold cake.”

“*Won’t see them blagging, blatching or blurting on their brooms*; *Playing by the rules, they’re nobody’s fools; Other teams will meet their dooms*!”

Gaspar elbowed Angus to get his attention.

“Would you look at Greengrass in this?” Gaspar said, with a nod to the *Prophet*. “Taken during a Hogsmeade trip last weekend, it says.”

Angus squinted at the photograph, one of many printed in the Society Section.

“Grief’s a good look on her.”

“‘Too right, it is.”

“You’re terrible, both of you,” said Hermione, turning back to the cupboards. “I’m sure Bedelia’s having a hard enough time as it is. Leave her alone.”

“Bit difficult to do that.”

“*Try*.”

“What do you expect me to do — pretend she doesn’t exist when she returns from school at Easter for our engagement party? That would go over well.”

She shut the drawer she had been rummaging in with a small *slam*.

“*I beg your pardon*?”

“Don’t look so alarmed,” Gaspar chortled. “It’s public knowledge that she was betrothed to a Death Eater, even if she didn’t know it at the time.”

“Hardly anyone is willing to take her now,” Angus put in, stopping his singing. “She’s considered spoiled goods.”

“But she’s completely innocent!” said Hermione, aghast.

“That doesn’t matter, though, does it? Her parents had no choice but to hand her off to someone supportive of the Dark Lord’s cause; someone who wouldn’t hold her previous betrothal against her. Bedelia would wind up a spinster, otherwise.”

“And she’s far too fit for that fate,” said Angus sagely.

“Oh, the poor girl.” Sighing, Hermione went back to her search. “How dreadful that must be, getting saddled with someone like you.”

“You would know, wouldn’t you?”

“Do you want cake or not, Gaspar?”

Gaspar elected to keep his mouth shut.

“Oh!” Biting her lip, she sorted through a paper packet until she found what she wanted, then eagerly returned to the island counter to slide it smoothly into the top of the cake.

“Whose birthday is it?”

“Never you mind,” she answered evasively, giving the cake a final onceover. She nodded to herself, pleased.

“Well, whosever it is,” said Gaspar, his eyes on the *Prophet*, “it seems they share a birthday with the newest Weasley runt.”

“Really?” said Hermione. “What a coincidence.”

“Merlin’s saggy bollocks!” exclaimed Angus. “*Another*?”

“And it’s a boy, too. He was born just after midnight this morning, according to this. One more, and the Weasleys could have themselves their own Quidditch team.”

“Wouldn’t that be something?” She tried to smother a smile, a nostalgic warmth flooding her chest. “Now,” she added, “would one of you please light this for me?”

Angus drew his wand from his pocket and aimed the tip at the white- and orange-striped candle atop the cake; a flame came silently to life.

Her elbows propped up on the counter, Hermione rested her chin on her clasped hands and watched the lit candle flicker and wave for a moment. With a deep breath, she closed her eyes, then had to squeeze them shut tighter to rein in their watering. If she started crying, she worried that she would never stop.

Please, just let me see him again one day.

As she opened her eyes and blew out the candle, she hoped with all her heart that her wish would come true.

“Can we eat it now?”

“Yes,” she said heavily. “Go find a knife to cut it with.”

A couple of minutes later, Angus was serving them each a slice of cake. The warm, gooey chocolate of her first bite was melting apart on her tongue when Tavaris entered the kitchen with Dinky. Trailing in after them, his expression supremely apprehensive, was Peter.

“Boys,” Tavaris said, and together, Gaspar and Angus spun round on their stools, the latter shovelling a large forkful of cake into his mouth as he did.

It appeared to take them a moment to register what it was they were seeing, and then, abruptly, they were howling with laughter, Gaspar hunched over and slapping his knee while Angus choked on his bite, bits of cake and spittle flying from his mouth.

“Oh, fuck,” Gaspar gasped, wiping tears from his eyes. “Tell us it’s him, Tavaris, *I beg you*. Tell us he’s the spy the Dark Lord was talking about.”

Tavaris’ only response was to smirk, meanwhile Peter had gone pink in the face and was twitching like he wanted to run away. Behind them, Crookshanks prowled into view.

“*This is* —” Angus hacked up more cake, “— *the greatest day* —” his next laugh was more of a wheeze, and he came dangerously close to toppling over, “— *of my life*!”

“My heart can’t bloody take this.” Grinning, Gaspar wiped his eyes again. He took a second to catch his breath, then added blithely, “Fancy a bit of cake, Pettigrew?”

Hermione scoffed.

“As if *Wormtail* is getting a single bite of this.”

That did Angus in; he tumbled off the stool, wheezing still, and landed on his hands and knees on the floor. Gaspar succumbed to laughter all over again, clutching his stomach as though pained.

“You’re not to speak about this with anyone who doesn’t already know,” Tavaris informed them, stern yet seeming on the verge of laughing himself. “That includes Severus.”

He strode further into the kitchen, the limp that had been lingering since the end of January appearing moderately lesser than the day before, although perhaps he had just taken a potion for the pain. Too prideful for a stool, he came to stand behind the island counter and reached into the cot to tickle the bottom of one of Theodore’s socked-feet, making him giggle and squirm.

Tavaris continued with a grin, his eyes fixed on Theodore. “The Dark Lord does not trust that Severus won’t let it slip to James Potter or Sirius Black the next time they succeed in riling him up — and we all know there *will* be a next time.”

With difficulty, Angus heaved himself back onto his stool. He could not manage to stop laughing long enough to take another bite of his cake.

“*Can you imagine the looks on their faces if they found out*?”

Tears were streaming down Gaspar's face. He stood, crossed the floor to Peter, and clapped him on the back hard enough to make him stagger.

"Welcome to the Death Eaters, Wormtail. We are so — *so* — happy to have you."

Crookshanks chose that moment to sink his teeth into Peter's ankle.

The rest of the Death Eaters who were permitted access to the identity of the Dark Lord's latest spy had a similar reaction to Gaspar and Angus.

Although Lucius managed to maintain his composure when he was introduced to Peter a week later, his cool laughter echoed throughout the front hall as he left. An increasingly big-bellied Narcissa, who often took tea with Hermione whilst Lucius was being trained, had looked at Peter much like the Narcissa of the future had looked at Hermione herself — as if he were something particularly foul that had gotten stuck to the bottom of her shoe.

The following week, Bellatrix and Rodolphus found out. For once not glaring suspiciously at Hermione, as she was wont to do as of late, Bellatrix spent an entire fifteen minutes alternating between mocking and congratulating Peter for his betrayal of her cousin.

"You are one sweet, traitorous little thing," she leered, getting right up in his face. "A pity you aren't Potter, but I suppose he has reached the point of no return, sullying his bloodline with that pet Mudblood he keeps."

"Point of no return, indeed," Tavaris said. He glanced up at Hermione, who was peering down at them in the hall from the bannister above. "Wormtail has just seen the Dark Lord to inform him that the Potters and Longbottoms have both gone into hiding."

"Cowards," remarked Rodolphus.

"Expecting parents," corrected Tavaris.

Bellatrix whipped round to look at him.

"No," she breathed, her eyes widening in delight.

"Yes. Both sons, due to be born at the end of July."

Hermione walked away then, passing Crookshanks as he trotted downstairs to torment Peter some more. She did not want to hear what any of them had to say next.

The snow had long since begun to melt by the time the Easter holidays rolled around, which blessedly led to a decrease in Peter's visits.

Due to the ever-persistent April showers, all spell practice was temporarily held at Nottingham Hall, where access to a proper duelling room helped Tavaris and his pupils avoid the inconvenience of being soaked by heavy rain and slipping in massive puddles of mud. Barty, Rabastan, and Evan Rosier, all of whom had come to spend their break at the Nott Estate, were the next of the bunch to be forcibly taken aback by the addition of Peter to their ranks.

Hermione had not seen Barty so enormously gleeful since before Regulus had died.

“Oh, shit! *Bloody*, *buggering* — holy mother of — oh, this is too good, this is —!” He broke off, howling raucously at the threshold of the informal dining room, his hands planted on his knees to keep himself from toppling over like Angus had back in March.

Peter was seated at the table, looking severely out of place, and did nothing more than wait for the amusement to die out, by now accustomed to this reaction.

Rabastan was leaning against the frame of the archway for support, meanwhile Evan had his teeth digging into his fist to muffle his own undoubtedly wild guffaws. Hermione stood among them with her arms crossed over her chest.

“I won't eat at the same table as him, Tavaris.”

Annoyingly, Tavaris played dumb.

“Whyever not?”

“His face puts me off my food.”

Evan removed his fist from his mouth long enough to say, “A perfectly valid excuse.”

His face a merry red from a lack of oxygen, Barty staggered into the room to lower himself onto the chair opposite Peter. He took one look at him and had to drop his head, evidently incapable of remaining upright and laughing at the same time.

“Can — can you imagine the —?”

“— looks on their faces if they found out?” Peter finished flatly. “They won’t, so it doesn’t really matter.”

Rabastan sat down between him and Tavaris.

“But if they do,” he said, snickering, as Evan took the spot on Barty’s left, “I want a front-row seat when it happens.”

“I’d wager they would skin him alive.”

“What an appetising visual, Evan,” said Barty brightly. “Thank you for that.”

“Your stew is getting cold, Mione,” said Tavaris, with a beckoning wave of his hand. “Just sit.”

“Are you sure that’s a wise idea?” said Hermione, raising an eyebrow. “I may not have a knife, but I could still use a fork if I really wanted to.”

“A good thing we’re having stew, then.”

Glowering, she moved to take her seat.

“She stabbed someone,” Rabastan explained to Peter, in a theatrically loud whisper. “That’s why she’s not allowed knives.”

“Massive bloke, too,” said Barty, nodding his head in an attempt at seriousness. “Much bigger than you.”

“I heard the knife went right through his hand,” said Evan. He proceeded to scan the surface of the table. “There’s probably still a mark here somewhere …”

Peter looked at Hermione nervously.

“You may not be my greatest fan now,” he said, with a forced-sounding chuckle, “but I don’t reckon you hate me enough to really stab me. We were friends once, weren’t we, Mione?”

“You will address me as Lady Nott, or you will not address me at all.”

He visibly swallowed.

For the duration of the meal, Barty, Rabastan, and Evan spoke her first name far more than was strictly necessary, just to rub it in Peter’s face. Tavaris enjoyed every minute of it, of course.

The little sleep Hermione managed to obtain that night was troubled. Most of her sleep in the last couple of years had been, truthfully, but it had worsened since January, and soon, it would worsen again, because Theodore was due to begin teething by the end of the month.

Too early the following morning, she was awake and yawning next to him on her bedroom floor, watching him ignore the toys on his play mat in favour of trying to wriggle onto Crookshanks back.

Perhaps this was why Crookshanks had been so unruffled by the introduction of Rose, and later Hugo. The only instance in which he had retaliated against their affections had been when four-year-old Rose had tried to stuff him into one of her dresses, and that could have just been because it was the one Great-Aunt Muriel had sent her for Christmas.

Just as Hermione was about to lift Theodore off Crookshanks’ tail, there was an urgent knocking at the door. A hushed yet equally urgent voice filtered in through the slim space beneath it.

“*Mione*! *Mione*, *open the door*.”

She got up, frowning, grabbed her dressing gown off the side of the wardrobe, and approached the door to open it a crack and peer out into the hall. She did not have to look far.

“I need a favour,” Barty whispered hurriedly, his eyes frantic. Over his shoulder, she could see Evan shifting uncomfortably, his hands clasped at the back of his neck with his palms drawn up against the sides of his throat. “Please. Nott will be calling us down soon and Rabastan’s washing right now but he could come looking —”

“For heaven’s sake,” Hermione mumbled, yawning again. Rubbing the sleep out of one eye, she opened the door wider to let them in.

Barty scanned the room, letting out a rush of breath when he found only Theodore there. Evan turned to shut the door behind them with his foot.

“All right, then. Tell me what’s happened.”

“It’s better if we show you,” said Barty, after a beat. He licked his lips, then added, prompting, “Evan?”

There was a grimace on Evan’s face and a pink flush colouring his cheeks as he turned round to face them, dropping his hands; all over his neck were marks in varying shades of purple and red.

Hermione’s hand rose to cover her mouth.

“We tried every spell we could think of —” Barty gestured helplessly to Evan’s neck, as if it needed any more help attracting attention, “— but nothing has worked. I think I only made it worse.”

“You *did*,” Evan sneered. “And Nott is taking Rabastan and I to the Averys for the engagement party in less than three hours.”

Barty stepped closer to Hermione, dropping his voice.

“He didn’t have those marks at dinner last night, which means Nott will know someone *here* is responsible for them,” he said significantly. “If he suspects Rabastan, he’ll tell his father, and because Rabastan is the spare, his family can get rid of him if they really want to. If he suspects *me*, my father will be none the wiser, but do you think I would be allowed back here?” He pointed to Theodore, who was presently trying to eat Crookshanks’ ears. “Do you think I would be allowed near him?”

No, she thought, with a certainty that made her feel sick.

“Evan has a younger brother who can take his place as heir, but even if he isn’t disowned, he’ll still be punished. The only difference is, if Nott thinks it’s Rabastan or I, Evan will get to keep his life. What do you think would happen if he thought those marks were from *you*? What do you think would happen if the Dark Lord thought his mist—?”

“Don’t finish that sentence,” she said sharply.

Barty backed away, holding his hands up in acquiescence. But he looked no less determined.

“Makeup would cover it up, wouldn’t it? And then we wouldn’t have to find out what would or would not happen.”

Hermione drew a steadying breath, reining in her temper, then pointed to the seat of the vanity.

“Sit, Evan,” she snapped, and Evan obeyed gratefully. “And *you*, Barty, will be quiet.”

She waited for Barty to nod his head before striding into the ensuite. Leaving the door ajar so she could see both them and Theodore, she reached into the cabinet under the sink to retrieve a small tub of thick, yellow paste.

“Bruise removal paste?” Evan said when she returned, raising one of his pale eyebrows. “You just happen to have that on hand, do you?”

Hermione gave him a cold look as she removed the lid. Dinky had given her the paste about a year ago, after she had found out about Billy Stubbs and Tavaris had jabbed his wand at her throat; apparently, he had not wished to see the mark that had left.

Evan grimaced, maybe apologetically, maybe not, and undid the top buttons of his pyjamas, obediently revealing the rest of his neck.

A few minutes later, the marks began to fade under the unappealing smears of mustard-coloured paste, and Barty and Evan slipped from the room with a plan to stall for an hour, by which point they would be finished healing.

As Hermione picked through her breakfast in the conservatory around the time that morning could truly feel like morning, she had to take a moment to simply appreciate just how poor Barty’s luck was when it came to love. Whether that love be romantic, platonic, familial, or another form entirely, it never seemed to go in his favour.

According to the front page of the *Prophet* laid out before her, the clock on Evan’s life had just begun ticking.

VOTES ARE IN: BILL TO ENABLE AUROR-CAST UNFORGIVABLES PASSES.

She skimmed through the article. There was no mention of her assistance with the writing of the Bill, but she had not expected there to be. Besides, that was not what she was looking for.

On the second page, she found a copy of the main clauses.

S-1. *(1.1) Any individual employed by the British Ministry of Magic’s Auror Office; (1.2) shall hereby be exempt from the legal repercussions of casting any of the three identified Unforgivable Curses, named as they are, the Imperius Curse, the Cruciatus Curse, and the Killing Curse; (1.3) on any previously identified participant or individual seen engaging in illegal activity alongside at least one member of the unsanctioned league of radicals known as Death Eaters; (1.4) if only cast as means of a criminal interrogation, to ensure detainment, or in the event that the lives of they, the Auror, one or more of their brethren, or any impartial third party are under threat by the aforementioned radicals; (1.5) whether the Auror be on duty or otherwise.*

S-2. *(2.1) No Auror shall be unalterably and without exception exempt from the previously established legal repercussions of casting an Unforgivable Curse; (2.2) in the event that they should cast any of the three Unforgivable Curses on an innocent party; (2.3) deemed as such if said party is a non-member of the radicals known as Death Eaters, a civilian, or if the circumstances in which the curse is cast are declared non-life-threatening; (2.4.) by either or both the members of the British Ministry of Magic's Wizengamot and Council of Magical Law; (2.5) should the victim of the curse be targeted intentionally or unintentionally; (2.6.) whether the Auror be on duty or otherwise.*

S-3. *(3.1) Should an Auror be found guilty of casting an Unforgivable Curse outside of the above clauses of this exception, the Auror shall immediately be removed from active duty; (3.2) until the point at which they have been tried and declared innocent by either or both the members of the British Ministry of Magic's Wizengamot and Council of Magical Law; (3.3) unless the tried Auror has been declared guilty, in which case they shall be stripped of their badge; (3.4) and henceforth unfit for work in any office within the Department of Magical Law Enforcement; (3.5) for as long as the Auror may live.*

S-4. *(4.1) In the event that the victim of an Auror who has been found guilty of breaking the clauses of this Act is later found guilty themselves, the Auror discharged from duty shall be released from their sentence; (4.2) whether that sentence be served partially, in its entirety, or not at all; (4.3) however, the discharged Auror shall in this case still be deemed unfit for returning to active duty; (4.4) for as long as the Auror may live.*

S-5. *(5.1) The clauses of this Act do not apply to any individual not an Auror in the employ of the British Ministry of Magic's Department of Magical Law Enforcement; (5.2) at the time of the casting; (5.3) regardless of whether the individual may head or otherwise be a member of the department.*

The information Hermione was searching for, however, was not found until she went back, reading more carefully.

— to come into effect on 24 June.

The clock was ticking very fast, indeed, and not only for Evan.

For a sizeable chunk of Moody's face, too.

*

In the future, the second of May had long since been a day unkind to both the minds and hearts of the wizarding world. Even the passage of time had not lessened the mourning that took place when it arrived each year.

Closed signs were known to mark the doors of every establishment apart from those which served alcohol, leaving the barren streets of Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade Village to be embraced by a chillingly familiar gloom. Fights would break out between both friends and foes, and all Aurors, even those drowning in the depths of their own grief, were required to remain on-call for the full twenty-four hours. Overworked, some would take naps in strange places within the Auror Office, but, truth be told, no one old enough to remember ever got much sleep that day, nor the nights that caged it.

For the members of the Potter-Granger-Weasley clan, the second of May was as dark as it was for the rest; unlike the rest, however, they were expected to make it brighter. They were never capable of brighter, though, not on the day. Rather than attend memorials or give interviews and speeches like the ones they had reluctantly given in the past, they gathered at the Burrow when the sun began its descent, both their family and what remained of their closest friends', and shared a meal that George never finished, as well as drinks that he did. The children requested stories, Teddy more so than the others, and the telling of each was stilted and sad.

It always felt as though their table of mismatched chairs was surrounded by a dozen ghostly presences, of which, sometimes, one might fool themselves into thinking they caught a glimpse.

Emotions ran high on the anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts. It might have been eighteen years into the future for Hermione, but that changed nothing when she was surrounded by the people who would be responsible for it.

She had been gone for under a minute, just to fetch a teething ring from the nursery, Theodore left inconsolable by the pain in his gums, yet when she returned to the lady's parlour, she wanted to slap herself for stepping away at all.

The doors remained wide open from when she had left, the late morning sun still flooding in through the parlour windows and seeping out into the dim hall beyond, and the cot in which Theodore laid had not moved from its spot between the painted coffee table and the royal-blue sofa, but, standing with her wand drawn and her back to the hall, there was the unwelcome addition of Bellatrix.

Before Hermione could fully register what she was seeing, there came the crooning murmur of a spell.

"*Serpensortia*."

With the muffled *boom* of a distant cannon, a long snake with gleaming black scales was spat out onto the rug, landing directly before the cot.

At once, it rose to strike.

Hermione did not hesitate; she dropped the teething ring, seized one of the silver standing candelabras that bracketed the doors from the outside — its candles unlit and its height a mere two feet below her own — and stormed into the parlour. The sound of movement

behind her made Bellatrix turn, but not fast enough to duck out of the way before Hermione swung the candelabra at the back of her head.

Bellatrix dropped with a grunt of surprise, her right arm — and with it, her wand — trapped beneath her chest. Hermione stepped over her, gripping the candelabra so tightly that it hurt, and lifted it high into the air as the snake turned its head, locking eyes with her. When the candelabra came down, it darted out of the way, slithering swiftly up onto the sofa and closer to the sobbing victim it had been Conjured for.

The cry that left Hermione's mouth was one of pure, animalistic rage, white-hot flames coursing through her bloodstream. She slammed the candelabra down a second time, hitting the end of the snake's tail, and succeeding only in making it sink into the cushions of the sofa.

The snake reared back with a hiss, unhinging its jaws; she dodged left just as it launched itself at her, and it crashed into the edge of the coffee table, falling into a loose coil. Without pause, she raised the candelabra again and slammed it down as if it were a large mallet; two of the four candles went flying off, and the metal of one arm made the snake's neck bend at an obscene angle.

Yet its head still rose, its forked-tongue shooting out as it hissed with renewed fury.

Gritting her teeth, she twisted her grasp and dug the metal arm into the snake's neck with full force. Theodore's cries of pain and alarm rang shrilly, but she spared him no glance, unwilling to take her eyes off the snake for a second, even to steal Bellatrix's wand.

Keeping it pinned at the neck, Hermione kicked off her heels and jumped onto the wriggling, scaled body, restraining it further with her weight. In that moment, fear was little more than a distant concept she had once come across in a book, for this snake had absolutely nothing on Nagini.

She adjusted her angle, took aim, and bashed the snake's head in.

Then she did it again, and again, long after the snake had stopped moving, its blood splattering across the rug, up the front of the sofa, and onto her bare feet and the hem of her dress. Only when its detached head was rolling along the floor did she finally stop.

Panting harshly, Hermione threw the candelabra away with a loud *THUD* and a clatter of metal, and stepped off the dead, scaly tail. Her heart was beating in her ears, nearly as loud as the sound of Theodore's fright. She cast a glance behind her at Bellatrix, who had not moved from the floor, and then had to do a double-take, catching sight of two figures standing at the threshold of the room.

"*What — the hell — is she — doing here*?"

"I sent her," the Dark Lord confessed, as his eyes roved over the scene before him. "The others, too. I have something planned for this afternoon, and I now see that I chose the perfect day for it."

"*She just set a snake on my son*," Hermione snarled, pointing furiously at the unconscious Bellatrix. "What do you mean, *you sent her*?"

Tavaris turned his head slowly, unblinking, to look down at Bellatrix. The black curls at the back of her head were slick and matted with blood; judging by the way his eyes were bathed in shadow, cold and empty of even the barest of glints, he thought there should be more of it.

"You misunderstand. I did not send her *here*, merely to the estate. I suppose she wandered off." The Dark Lord, too, glanced at Bellatrix. "An unwise decision on her part, it would appear … I do not believe that she had any intention of harming young Theodore — rather," he added, looking now at the dead snake, "that she wished to test a theory."

It need not be explained further; they all knew what theory Bellatrix had been attempting to test.

"Not even a little hiss?"

Hermione laughed mirthlessly.

"I'm going to kill her."

"No," said the Dark Lord coldly, "you are not."

Bravely, she asked, "Are you going to stop me?"

"You will stop yourself."

"You sound quite confident about that."

He seized her with a cold stare, his entire focus centred upon her. His wand was held firmly at his side, not yet raised.

"*Think*," he said, in a near-hiss, "of what the price of killing her would be."

Tonks won't die on this day eighteen years from now.

"Ask yourself if you're willing to pay it."

The fingers of Bellatrix's left hand, splayed out in front of her, were twitching as she gradually regained consciousness.

She, too, would die on that day, and people would cheer when she did.

Hermione turned away.

"*Good*," praised the Dark Lord softly, condescendingly, as she finally lifted Theodore from his cot to soothe. "Now, go clean yourself up, and dress for being outdoors. You and I have an errand to run."

Wisely, she did as she was told, and wiser, without question, but even after washing the blood off her feet and changing into fresh clothes, Hermione could still feel every nerve-ending in her body buzzing like live wires, her muscles tense and ready for a fight.

She made her way down the wide staircase, holding on to the wooden railing to have something she could tighten her fingers around.

Dinky was now holed up in the nursery, instructed to not let Theodore out of their sight. Crookshanks, too, was there, on guard by the door as though another snake might suddenly slither its way in underneath it to execute a secondary attack. He had shown up at the lady's parlour just as Hermione had been leaving and had clawed at the limp snake as if thinking it could possibly be any more dead than it already was.

With him and Dinky, Theodore was protected, so she did not worry too deeply as she descended the steps to the ground floor, a pale-blue cloak draped over her shoulders in preparation of whatever outdoor errand the Dark Lord had in mind.

He stood waiting at the foot of the stairs, conversing with Tavaris in low tones. Behind them and lined up in an orderly fashion they did not often resign themselves to while at the Nott Estate, were Gaspar, Angus, Snape, and a young man who looked as though he were barely a man at all. He had thick tufts of brown hair and a face covered in what must have been over a hundred freckles. It took a second for her to recognise him as Carden Travers, Eamon Travers' younger brother, who had been removed from Hogwarts after being told he would have to redo his third year.

"There she is," the Dark Lord said, catching sight of Hermione. He looked back at Tavaris, whose shoulders were unnaturally stiff. "We shall be on our way, then. I don't believe it should take more than an hour or so — two, at most. Have them ready for when we return."

"Yes, my Lord," said Tavaris, bowing his head. His eyes darted to Hermione, his expression unreadable, and then he gestured for the group to follow him down the hall towards the study. They all shot backward glances at Hermione and the Dark Lord, openly curious.

"Come, Lady Nott," said the Dark Lord, turning in the opposite direction. "There's something you must be made aware of prior to our departure."

She said nothing, moving at her own pace as she followed him out the front doors, down the stone steps, and onto the gravel drive. The sun shone down on them, nary a cloud in sight, and there was a slight breeze that made her cloak flap about her calves. Despite the good weather, the grass remained as yellowed and lifeless as ever.

He came to a halt before the wrought-iron gates. There was a strangely anticipatory glint in his eyes.

"Is there a reason we had to come all the way out here to Apparate?" she asked, stopping a few feet away. She crossed her arms, looking out at the continuation of the drive, which led down the hill and disappeared into the treeline. "I thought you had full reign over the wards at Nottingham Hall."

“How presumptuous of you to assume we’re going to Nottingham Hall.”

Something twisted inside her stomach, and Hermione tore her eyes from the view beyond the gates.

“Then where are you taking me?” she asked uneasily.

His eyes glinted twice as brightly, his lips twitching at the corners. Without yet answering, the Dark Lord drew his wand in a wide arc, a clear ripple appearing in its wake; there was a *click* of a lock, a dull *screech* of rusting metal, and the gates parted at the middle, swinging outwards with painstaking slowness to *CLANG* against the tall, spire fencing on either side.

He stepped over the property line.

“Someplace public.”

Hermione staggered backwards in shock, her arms dropping to her sides.

“For many months now, you have been under a test,” the Dark Lord revealed, smug. He gestured to the open gates with his wand, and the twitching of his lips expanded into a smirk. “The Blood Wards that held you here, Lady Nott, have been lowered since January.”

Her brain stalled.

“You never attempted to escape … never approached the fence even to verify that the barrier remained … Because of that, you have earned back some of the freedoms you were stripped of when you were brought here the June before last.”

Freedoms, thought Hermione, unable to wrap her head around what that meant. She took a step forwards, then another, but stopped before she reached the point at which the gates should have been blocking her path. She eyed the ground warily.

“Well? What are you waiting for?”

“This isn’t another test?” she asked, in a fragile voice. “The Blood Wards are truly gone?”

“For you,” said the Dark Lord mysteriously.

Taking the first step past the property line made Hermione hold her breath. Realistically, she knew that if he were telling the truth, her foot would go through the remaining wards, and the rest of her body would not be denied passage when it tried to follow; this did not stop her from tensing up, waiting for the invisible wall to return and shove her back. It felt as though she were consciously stepping onto an active landmine, naively believing that if she were to only hold her breath, it would somehow fail to explode.

But her first step was not impeded by an unseen barrier, and her second did not trigger an explosive buried beneath the earth. The loose gravel made a *crunching* noise under her heels. She paused, releasing her breath, and glanced back. The gates swung inwards, closing with another reverberating *CLANG*, leaving the estate on one side of them, and her standing firmly on the other.

For the first time in one year, ten months and two days, Hermione had left Nott land.

“We don’t have all day, Lady Nott,” the Dark Lord said, causing her to start, whirling round to stare at him. He beckoned her closer. “We have quite a distance to travel.”

She gulped, blinking back the sudden watering in her eyes, and walked towards him in a daze. Instead of insisting she take his arm as she expected him to, his own shot out to wrap around her middle, inciting a yelp of alarm; he yanked her back against his chest and clamped a hand over her mouth.

“Don’t scream,” he whispered, as if he were telling a joke. With no further warning, he took off, their feet leaving the ground as they soared higher and higher into the air at a bloodcurdling speed, nothing but his magic keeping them from spiralling back down to earth, and Hermione, to her death —

She screamed. Into her ear, the Dark Lord laughed. Under the cover of black smoke, he flew on, moving them weightlessly West with the wind. The smoke blinded her; squeezing her eyes shut, she clung to his arm with one hand, fisting the shoulder of his cloak with the other, her screams muffled by the cold skin of his palm. Thoughts of him dropping her filled her head, along with increasingly gruesome images of her body colliding with the ground.

Absurdly, she marvelled at the fact that she had not yet lost her shoes.

There was no way to tell how long they spent traversing through the sky, but when they landed, it was as sudden as their take off. Her knees slammed into hard stone as she fell forwards onto her hands, sobbing in relief.

“Welcome to the Black Forest.”

Hermione raised her head, her heart still attempting to beat itself out of her chest. Her ears were ringing.

“We’re in *Germany*?” she gasped.

The Dark Lord let out a high, lilting laugh. As the world gradually stopped spinning, a thicket at the edge of the cobblestone walk they had landed on came into focus behind him, made up mostly of pine and fir, so dense that the root-covered paths between them each stretched quickly out of sight. She gaped, trying to catch her breath.

“Germany,” she repeated hysterically.

“Indeed,” he said, reaching back to draw the large, black hood of his cloak over his head; had she not been looking up from below him, his face would have been concealed from her. “Dust yourself off. We have a short walk ahead of us.”

With shaking arms, Hermione steadied herself enough to balance on her knees, then began the tremulous ascent to standing. Once on her feet, she brushed the dirt off her knees, which were now scraped, and pulled the white skirt of her dress down to cover them. The palms of

her hands, too, were scraped, and she winced as a Wiping Spell washed over both them and her knees.

Not a Healing Spell, though; never a Healing Spell.

“Come along,” the Dark Lord said, starting up the uneven walk. Drawing her own hood, she followed on weak legs, reassuring herself with the knowledge that this was apparently meant to take no more than a couple of hours, and that Tavaris had been told she would be included in the return trip.

The cobblestone carried them up a small incline between the tall trunks and wild bushes, the sun creeping through the gaps in the treetops to light the way and indistinct noises of various animals who resided within the Forest filling the silence.

After a time, they arrived at a clearing hidden within the grove, at the centre of which was a large cottage embraced by overgrown plants that appeared to be trying to scale the weathered walls of its white stucco exterior. It was patterned with timber framing and had dark green shutters, a wooden front door with a round top and a stained-glass window, and a shingled roof covered in moss, from which spouted a stone chimney.

At the front, protruding from the unkempt bushes, was a large wooden sign which read, in sharp, silver lettering, *Gregorovitch Zauberstäbe, gegr. 1901*.

Hermione choked, tripping over her own feet.

“We’ve come to see Gregorovitch? *That’s* the errand?”

As far as she knew, the Dark Lord had taken it upon himself to pay Mykew Gregorovitch a visit only once; in 1997, years after Gregorovitch’s shop had closed, when he had hunted him down to inquire after the Elder Wand.

Gregorovitch had not survived that visit.

Without breaking stride, the Dark Lord replied, “You require a wand.”

“A wand,” she said faintly. It took a moment for her to remember how to work her legs again, then she followed him up to the front door and into the wand shop.

Taking up what must have been at least half of the cottage’s ground floor, Gregorovitch’s shop was three times the size of Ollivander’s, and much less shabby. Shelves the same dark wood as the floors lined every wall barring the windowed front, each one stocked with orderly stacks of thin boxes in various colours; a pair of maroon armchairs sat before an unlit fireplace at the far end of the room, a spindly table with an unfilled vase between them; and near the back wall was a small counter, behind which was a thick velvet curtain.

The Dark Lord looked his fill as he approached the counter, suggesting this was his first visit. The appreciative expression she spotted vanished when he tapped the bell atop the counter.

A deep, throaty voice sounded from the back of the cottage. The curtain was drawn back to reveal a grey-haired wizard with a wizened face and a long beard, who wore turquoise robes

that hung open to reveal a copper-coloured waistcoat. His lips had just begun forming what was surely a practised smile when the Dark Lord waved his wand at the door, locking it with an undeniable *click*.

Gregorovitch stilled.

"Warum bist du hier?" he demanded, squinting at the Dark Lord to catch a glimpse of his face; not nearly so short as Hermione, he couldn't seem to manage it. "Was wollen Sie?"

The Dark Lord sounded amused by his suspicion. "Why else would we come here," he said, drawing back the hood of his cloak to reveal his face, "if not for a wand?"

Gregorovitch's eyes widened, his face rapidly losing all colour. He began shaking his head in denial, and Hermione stepped forth before he could open his mouth to voice it.

"I'm sorry if we've come at a bad time, Mr Gregorovitch," she said. "We aren't familiar with the hours you keep." Removing her cloak to drape it over her arm, she added, "I'm Lady Nott."

Gregorovitch shifted his attention to her.

"Nott?"

She nodded. "My husband's family speaks very highly of your wands, and since I've found myself in need of a new one, I thought I might try here this time rather than Ollivander's."

"*Ah*." Gregorovitch appeared to relax slightly. "I see, I see. You are requiring new wand, made by me."

"Yes," said Hermione purposefully. "Made by *you*."

He shot a wary look at the Dark Lord, then rounded the counter to greet her properly.

"It is pleasure, Lady Nott," Gregorovitch said smoothly, taking her hand when she offered it to bend down and kiss her knuckles. "Great, great pleasure. I have indeed sold wands to many Notts. Always, they leave my shop satisfied. You will leave with same feeling, I promise you."

"Thank you, sir."

"No, no — thank *you*." Still bent over her hand, Gregorovitch flicked his eyes to where she knew the Dark Lord stood, then gave her hand a meaningful squeeze. "Thank you."

Thank you for stopping me before I let slip about the Elder Wand, she thought he might have meant, and she squeezed his hand in return.

A couple of minutes later, Hermione was trying very hard to ignore the tickling of a rather intrusive measuring tape. Her cloak had been hung up for her by an ancient-looking house-elf named Perda, and the Dark Lord had been offered refreshments, which, naturally, he

declined. He watched closely from one of the armchairs, never once stowing away his wand, as Gregorovitch recorded Hermione's measurements with hands that trembled.

"Your old wand, Lady Nott, one that you buy from *Ollivander* —" Gregorovitch sneered a little at the name, "— you will tell me about it?"

Hermione hesitated. Alas, her wand had been taken away quite some time ago; by now, the Dark Lord likely already knew what it had been made of.

"It was vine wood," she said, "with a dragon heartstring core. Roughly ten-and-three-quarters long in inches."

"Wielders of vine, I have known to seek greater purpose — visionaries, you say. It was not so flexible, I think." Gregorovitch hummed to himself, eyeing her thoughtfully. "Your mind, it is not so flexible, either … is it?"

It was the Dark Lord who answered, sounding so painfully knowing that she had to look away.

"Lady Nott, you'll find, is a witch of unyielding opinions, pragmatic as she may also be. She is no visionary, though. Her dreams died a quick death, Gregorovitch, so long ago that they are no longer mourned."

After an uncomfortable moment of silence, Gregorovitch asked, "Your other strengths, my Lady?"

"She's remarkably creative in her choice of weapon."

There was a second pause, and then he puttered over to his collection of wands, mumbling something inscrutable about, "Notts," and, "Gewalt ist die Lösung für alles."

The next quarter of an hour saw Hermione trying wand after wand, from blackthorn to pine, dragon heartstring to Curupira hair, and of lengths from a mere seven inches to just over eleven. Gregorovitch grew increasingly on edge with every wand that proved itself a poor fit, often throwing nervous glances at the Dark Lord, as though worried he would eventually lose his patience, and further worried about what that loss might entail. At one point, he brought Hermione an apple wood wand, took one look at the Dark Lord, and hastily put it back with a row of matching white boxes before she had the chance to grab it.

Throughout it all, Gregorovitch kept muttering to himself, too low for the Dark Lord to hear.

"... stinkt nach Dunkler Magie … mein Laden stinkt zum Himmel … immer die Notts …"

After the fourth time he brought Hermione a new wand only to take it away at the last second — this one a nine-inch aspen wand with a unicorn hair core that was kept in a scarlet box — he stopped, frowning, to pose another question.

"What do you fear, my Lady?"

Hermione blinked, taken aback. She opened her mouth, then closed it, unable to find the right answer; the safe one, given her present company.

“Many things,” that company said, “yet admirably little.”

“Dann vielleicht …” Gregorovitch trailed off, returning to the shelves — in particular, one that held an entire three rows of yellow boxes. It was then that Hermione realised the whole collection was colour-coded; out of all he had given her thus far, wands with unicorn hair cores had come most often from colours either softer or brighter than the ones from which came the likes of the blackthorn she had first tried.

Gregorovitch’s hands were still trembling when he approached her with the next wand; it was a pinkish-red colour, both long and thin, and had a strange, triangular pattern about the handle.

“Cedar wood, my Lady,” he told her, setting the box down on the counter. “It is nine-and-half inches. Not unyielding, but very firm. You will try.”

When Hermione grasped the wand, a warm rush swept swiftly up her arm and spread throughout the rest of her body, and a strong tingling sensation danced across her skin. Inhaling a breath that felt to fill her lungs to the brim, she lifted the wand, then moved it in a motion reminiscent of sketching an ocean wave, whispering, “*Avis*.”

There was a sound like a gunshot, and blue light hurled from the tip of the wand, in which came several yellow birds that began to flit about the shop, twittering. She smiled at them, her eyes welling up.

Gregorovitch was watching her with a strange expression on his face; it was some combination of wonder, triumph, and what looked like bitterness. He cleared his throat, putting on that practised smile of his.

“This is wand for you,” he decided.

The Dark Lord rose gracefully from the armchair. “You neglected to mention the core.”

Gregorovitch gulped.

“It is unusual, the core,” he said, in a stilted voice. “Most difficult to use, very tricky to master. This wand is first successful attempt of mine. Most difficult, I tell you.”

“And?” said the Dark Lord, prowling closer. “What is it?”

“It is hair I have taken from tail of Thestral,” said Gregorovitch reluctantly.

“Thestral hair?” said Hermione, wondering if she had heard him correctly.

“Yes, my Lady. It is Thestral hair.”

For a moment, the sole noise in the shop was that of the birds. She peered curiously at the open wand box left on the counter. It was one of the yellow ones, but there was a minor

difference in that it had a tiny symbol etched onto the front: a triangle, with a space in the middle of it where one might add a circle and a line.

She knew of only one other wand that had a Thestral hair core; Gellert Grindelwald had stolen it from this very place.

"Unusual, indeed," the Dark Lord said, breaking the silence. He dropped his hand onto her shoulder, slowly enough that it did not startle her, nor make her flinch — much. "Tell me more about this wand."

"It is known as unwise to cross one who owns a cedar wand," Gregorovitch began haltingly, inching back. "Frightening, it is said … if harm is done to ones they love …"

The Dark Lord waited.

"Ah — they have, I have found, good perception," continued Gregorovitch, now pressing his back against the counter. His hand twitched towards his pocket. "They cannot be fooled easily. Often, they possess powerful insight."

At that, the Dark Lord's lips twitched. He looked at him a while longer, his head tilting slightly to one side. Gregorovitch kept very still.

"If that is all, we shall take our leave," said the Dark Lord at last. He Summoned Hermione's cloak from the stand near the door and handed it to her. "Lady Nott will be sure to inform her husband of your generosity," he added to Gregorovitch, as she pulled it on.

Gregorovitch cottoned on at once, nodding his head frantically.

"Yes! A gift! Lady Nott must not pay, I insist!"

"That's very kind of you, Mr Gregorovitch," said Hermione, her smile weakening. Silently, she rid his shop of the Conjured birds.

The Dark Lord prowled closer still, his wand rising in his white-fingered grasp. He rested the tip on Gregorovitch's shoulder.

"Can I assume that you will keep word of this visit to yourself?"

The tremor of Gregorovitch's hands spread to the rest of his body.

"Yes," he whispered shakily. His back bowed over the rim of the counter as the wand was drawn across his collarbones. "No one, I will tell no one."

"But can I be sure? Perhaps you require a little … incentive."

"Is that really necessary?" asked Hermione quickly. "He already said he wouldn't tell anyone."

"I will not!" insisted Gregorovitch. "I swear to you!"

The Dark Lord did not pause to consider it. “If you interfere, Lady Nott,” he said, his wand now at Gregorovitch’s throat, “those freedoms you have just earned yourself will be taken away before you have been given the chance to experience them.”

At that, she thought, as she often did, of how she had fulfilled her purpose, and of how she could be discarded at any moment if he were to deem her existence too inconvenient to continue allowing. Shoulders dropping, she thought of how she had not said good-bye to Theodore.

She turned away, casting a Muffling Charm over her ears so she could pretend at ignorance when the screaming began.

A large, cold hand grasped her by the neck when it was done. The Charm fell, her wand was taken, and the Dark Lord led her from the shop.

“I have heard tales of Thestral hair cores in my travels,” he said as they travelled back down the cobblestone walk. “As Gregorovitch said, they are exceedingly rare, as is the trait for which they choose their owners … Those precious few, and now yourself, are believed to be unafraid of death.”

He stopped, forcibly turning her head towards him.

“Tell me, Lady Nott … are you unafraid?”

Before Hermione could decide on an answer, she was dragged back into the sky.

When they returned to the gravel drive which led to the wrought-iron gates of the Nott Estate, she found that the grass was no less dead there than it was on the other side of the fence. With a weariness that she felt deep within her bones, she followed the Dark Lord back onto the yellowed grounds.

“Wards to prevent Apparation were added this morning,” he told her as they rounded the estate. “To both this property and Nottingham Hall. But you should know, whilst you, provided you have been given permission by either myself or Tavaris and are accompanied by an approved escort, may leave Nott land, the same cannot be said for your son.”

Hermione stopped in her tracks. She stared up at him.

“Yes,” said the Dark Lord, with relish. “The wards raised with your very own blood were indeed lifted, but the ones designed for young Theodore were not. He shall be able to travel to and from any property owned by the Notts, and soon, any property owned by the Malfoys, but he shall not have the freedom to go anywhere else. Do you understand why that is?”

“It’s to prevent me from trying to escape with him,” she said, reining in a rise of renewed anger. “You would imprison a child just to control their mother?”

“I thought you knew me better than to bother asking a question like that.”

I can’t leave Theodore, she thought, for what felt like the thousandth time, and she realised the Dark Lord knew it too.

He was counting on it.

“Now, enough dallying. You’re going to enjoy this.”

On the grounds at the back of the estate, Tavaris had gathered the group of young Death Eaters, who all dropped to their knees when they spotted the Dark Lord’s approach.

“My Lord,” Tavaris said, bowing over his walking-stick. He gave Hermione a onceover as he raised his head, as though to verify that she remained in one piece. Blindly, he appeared to think that she had.

The Dark Lord Conjured a high-backed armchair, its leather a deep red, and gestured for Hermione to sit. Then he asked, “Have they been made aware of today’s proceedings?”

“They are aware that they are being tested. I have waited for you to explain further, my Lord. But, they are ready.”

“With the exception of young Travers, of course,” said the Dark Lord, nearing the group on their knees. “But to observe will do him well … After all, I predict this to be quite the spectacle.”

“After this morning?” said Tavaris. “Undoubtedly.”

“Travers, you may step aside. You will not be participating.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Carden Travers said, and he hastened to stand by Hermione at the stone back wall of the estate.

“As for the rest of you, rise and take out your wands.”

With similar haste, Gaspar, Angus, and Snape stood and drew their wands, which they let hang at their sides as they awaited further instruction.

The Dark Lord circled them slowly, sizing them each up in turn. “You have been training here for nearly three years now,” he said. “I would hope that is time enough to prepare you … Of course, more is yet to come … additional areas of study you might hope to pursue, or a deeper understanding of that which you already have … if you wish it, and if you please me, it is yours …”

All three of them practically squirmed with greed.

“But first, a test. In your practice, you have fought each other, you have fought others of your brethren … you have even fought to fulfil the tasks I have assigned you to … but you have not experienced a true fight — a true duel. Taking out an unsuspecting Muggle is not the same as meeting an Auror or a member of Dumbledore’s Order in combat.

“Today, that will change.” The Dark Lord stopped to stand grandly in front of them. “Today, you will duel someone who has no qualms about harming you … someone who, were you to die, would not waste a single breath mourning …”

There's no way, Hermione thought, staring dumbly as he turned to her. He held out her new wand, and she stared dumbly at that as well.

"We're to be duelling *her*, my Lord?" said Snape, in disbelief.

"Yes, Severus. To face a member of the Order would not be too dissimilar, would you not agree?" To Hermione, the Dark Lord added enticingly, "Don't you wish to make them hurt, Mione?"

She could feel the heat rising in her blood before she even picked up the wand. Standing from the armchair, she weighed it in her hands, finding the best grasp.

"You're truly going to let me do this?"

"You know what damage may or may not to inflict."

Gaspar and Angus looked faintly terrified. On this day, eighteen years in the future, they would bring harm to innocent people attempting to defend their school and the lives of those within it; they would assist in creating the list of names later known as the Fallen Fifty.

Hermione removed her cloak and tossed it onto the armchair. As an afterthought, she also removed her heels. She rolled her shoulders back, testing the seams of her dress — loose enough that her arms would not be restricted — and took her place opposite the group, feeling more awake than she had in months. *He's right,* she thought as she raised her wand, *I will enjoy this.*

"You first, Avery."

Gaspar stepped away from the group, turning his wand over in one hand. Anxiety radiated off him.

"Why so nervous, Gaspar?" asked Hermione, feigning concern. "You're the one who's spent the last few years in training. I, on the other hand, haven't held a wand in all the time I've been on these grounds."

He ignored her. "The terms, my Lord?"

"Don't kill her," was all the Dark Lord said, and then it began.

Amusingly, the first spell Gaspar cast was an attempt to Disarm her. Hermione, assuming it would be a spell far more troublesome than that, dodged right as soon as he raised his wand. Then she cried, "*Deteriorare*!"

The Hex was met with an immediate, glittering shield.

"This isn't second-year Defence Against the Dark Arts, Gaspar!" Tavaris shouted from the side-lines. "I taught you better than this!"

This was a test for him, too, in a way, she supposed, and she ducked the swirling golden light of a Confusion Hex.

“That’s the first spell they teach you in Auror training!” she said loudly, backing surely away. “And even *they* aren’t using it these days.”

“*Langlock*!” snapped Gaspar. The verbal warning gave her more time to raise a Shield Charm, but his attempt to tie her tongue made it clear that he knew she was avoiding going non-verbal; the problem was, so much time had gone by, Hermione did not know how well she could.

“*Innocinnus*!” she hissed, trying at a lower voice, and when it hit its mark and Gaspar tripped, she used the momentary distraction to give non-verbal a go.

Instant scalping made him look rather like a neo-Nazi skinhead. She half-expected him to start raving about white power. It was fitting, really. The Dark Lord seemed to make the connection as well, and he laughed right along with her.

“Move your fucking feet, Gaspar!” said Tavaris. “She’s not stayed in one spot for more than a few seconds!”

Fury appeared to override Gaspar’s nerves; the next spell shot at Hermione was one she did not recognise, but the sneer on his face let her know that he was done playing it safe. The spell was followed quickly by a Knee-Reversal Hex. She side-stepped both as if dancing, and hurled a Conjunctivitis Curse at him; unfortunately, he Shielded it, and they continued with his eyesight still intact.

Eventually, the Dark Lord ordered Angus to join. The latter’s first move was to cast the Imperius Curse.

Hermione laughed as she spun away. “How predictable!” She dropped and rolled to avoid Gaspar’s Blasting Curse; the ground behind her exploded like the landmine she had irrationally feared would trigger when she crossed the property line earlier, and soil erupted with an ear-splitting *BOOM*.

“That had better not been meant to hit her!” she heard Tavaris bark over the ringing of her ears. Dizzy with it, she became an easy target; Angus’ second Imperius Curse washed over her, the sensation of utter peace causing her muscles to go slack and her thoughts to muddle.

Drop your wand, came the unspoken command. But why would she do that when she was having so much fun? Some people — better people, perhaps — might choose peace even when revenge was at their fingertips, but Hermione was not one of those people.

She rose slowly and calmly to her feet, as if in a trance. Both Angus and Gaspar waited with bated breath. Her fingers loosened on her wand, and then —

Angus staggered, startled to find himself abruptly barefooted.

“Again, with the predictability, Mulciber!” she said as she went low, the blazing rush of a spell grazing the hair at the top of her head. “*Sectumsempra*!”

He did not really need all his toes, did he? Just the big ones, for stability purposes.

Two spells came at Hermione at the same time, Snape now in the mix, meanwhile Angus fell to one knee with a strangled cry; she dove at him as the ground beneath her exploded once more, simultaneously avoiding a speeding blur of violet light. Her knee landed on Angus' bleeding foot, tearing a scream from his throat, and the next second, they were wrestling for his wand. He rolled on top of her — foolish, because he had now ruined his best advantage by turning himself into a human shield — and his elbow dug into her gut, knocking the breath out of her lungs.

"*Move*, Angus!" Gaspar's voice got through to him, being a sound that he trusted, and he rolled again, dragging her onto his chest. She stuck her wand between her teeth with her free hand just as an Impediment Jinx hit her square in the back, but her brief molasses-like movements were a waste when Angus unintentionally rolled them into one of the craters a split-second later. His foot must have hit the edge of the sunken dirt, because he cried out, tears in his eyes and spittle spraying her in the face, his forearm crushing her windpipe —

The Jinx expired, and Hermione won the battle for his wand; she dug the tip into his side and Stunned him with it. The suffocating weight of his subsequent collapse was terribly inconvenient, but at least she still had a shield. Using his wand once more, she squeezed her eyes shut and Blasted the earth beside her head.

She would need a long soak in the bath after this.

The moment she wriggled free and out of her makeshift tunnel, a Knockback Jinx had her toppling sideways onto the grass. She rolled swiftly from the edge of the crater, and kept at it, dirt flying as spell after spell struck the ground after her, until a large pair of shiny black Oxfords came into view. Hastily, she scrambled behind them before standing, panting for breath.

"Hiding behind your husband now?" she heard Snape jeer. "I never took you for a coward!"

He would die on this day as well, and he would die a good man. That did not make him a good man now, though.

Hermione placed Angus' wand in Tavaris' hand, then removed her own from between her teeth to shout back, "I thought Slytherins were supposed to be resourceful! I was given no order to not use my surroundings to my advantage!"

Tavaris snickered. "She's right, Severus! You're showing the Dark Lord what you've learnt these past few years! Use everything available to you!"

And so, with a spat curse, Snape did. Proving what a great friend he was to have at one's side, when Hermione shot a Horn-Tongue Hex at him from the side-lines, he Levitated Angus' unconscious body in front of himself. Gaspar, evidently a better friend, removed the Hex before Angus could choke to death.

"*What the fuck*, *Severus*?"

She chose that moment to run for the tree-lined slope which preceded the cemetery beyond the back fence. Her sprint was zig-zagged to evade both the craters and the multi-coloured

collection of hexes, jinxes, and curses they hurled at her. Behind the nearest tree trunk, she hid, trying to catch her breath.

“Hiding again?” she heard Snape shout.

“Your friends are hiding, too!” Gaspar chimed in, making her stiffen against the tree. “Too *cowardly* to show their faces now that the consequences of their actions have finally caught up to them!”

There was a blood-chilling *creaking* noise; the tree behind her began to tremble warningly, the branches above shaking with something far more powerful than a strong gust of wind. Swearing under her breath, Hermione stumbled and slid down the dead, grassy slope, tripping over gnarled roots as the ground itself started to quake. She dove, tumbling further down with a scream as the tree came crashing down, its collapse accompanied by an earth-shaking *BOOM*.

Her body collided with another tree trunk, knocking the air out of her again; the ends of the branches landed on her, scratching up her face, chest, and arms. For a moment, she could not move nor speak, and garbled moans left her mouth when she tried.

Through the brambles, she saw the blurry forms of Snape and Gaspar racing towards the top of the slope some twenty yards away. They probably thought they had her beat.

But Hermione refused to come out of this fight anything but victorious. Her arm ached, impeded by the bundles of thin, poking branches, her wand gripped so tightly that she would likely have trouble releasing it later. Be that as it may, she did not need to move much to take aim.

Just as Snape and Gaspar came fully into view, a shimmering, silver sheen shot up the tree towards them, liquifying it bit by bit too fast for the transformation to register before it was done; they both staggered in surprise at the top, nearly losing their balance.

And then the liquefied tree turned to ice, and they did.

Her body obeyed her once more, thankfully, as they came sliding down the strip of frozen slope with flailing limbs and shrieks of alarm; she crawled out of the way, elbows in the dirt, in time for them to collide violently with each other and the tree, smacking against the base with two loud *THUMPS*.

Hermione Stunned them both before their senses could return to them, then Disarmed them. With three wands in hand, she began the tremulous climb back up the hill. Her scraped knees gave out twice and her arms shook with every effortful drag, but she did not pause even to wipe away the blood she felt trickling down her face.

When she reached the top, she was beaming brighter than the sun itself. She heaved herself up, swaying with exhaustion, her lungs burning, and began limping across the grass to where Tavaris, the Dark Lord, and Carden Travers still stood. She swerved round the craters, stepped over Angus’ unmoving body, and placed Snape’s and Gaspar’s wands in Tavaris’ hand.

“I win.”

“Indeed, you have, darling,” he said smugly.

Hermione relinquished her own wand reluctantly when he kept his hand out, then moved over to the Conjured armchair and threw herself onto it, panting.

“Well done,” the Dark Lord said, sounding anything but mocking. His eyes were narrowed on her when she looked up at him, his head tilted. “You were trained well.”

She shrugged one shoulder, feigning humility.

“Clearly, Dumbledore wanted you for more than your mind. An excellent soldier, you would have been for him …” He observed her for a long minute before continuing, his voice a slithering inquiry. “He would have longed for your help in protecting the Longbottoms … or perhaps it would be the Potters, he would station you with … It could be either, at the moment; the unborn child of either pair could be the one prophesied to bring about my defeat.”

“I’ve never been one to put much stock in Divination myself,” said Hermione plainly.

“Ah, but fate is a magic of its very own,” said the Dark Lord, “and it is not one that mere mortals could ever hope to alter, although they will nearly always be fool enough to try … Alas, I am no mere mortal, Mione; I have power enough to tempt fate, and it will see me to victory.”

She held his gaze, taking in the raw determination, the unwavering trust in himself, the quiet intensity of his voice and the surety with which he spoke these words, believing himself so powerful that fate would ensure his triumph for him, regardless of any prophecy.

There was no denying that the Dark Lord was powerful, and as detrimental to his cause as the choices he would soon make were, he could never be labelled a fool. That did not change the fact, however, that on this day eighteen years from now, this unborn child would, as prophesied, stop him from fulfilling his goals.

The Dark Lord would never be the leader of wizarding Britain.

But Hermione would.

Chapter End Notes

A mostly happy, action-packed chapter, who would've thought?

In regards to the Bill, like I said before, I know exceedingly little about writing legislation, so don't mind the mistakes that are surely there.

Next up, Draco Malfoy and the start of a long line of character deaths!

Merciful Lady

Chapter Summary

> Twenty-four-seven baby machine
> So he can live out his picket fence dreams
> It's not an act of love if you make her
> You make me do too much labour
> — Labour, Paris Paloma

Chapter Notes

> CW: implied/referenced rape/non-con, references to miscarriages and still births, and Minor Character Death.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Many unexpected things had happened to Hermione since she had been sent unwillingly back in time, but this surely made the top five. After all, how could she have ever predicted to be present for the birth of Draco Malfoy?

Another guttural scream sounded from the next room. Lucius halted in his pacing, his head snapping towards the closed double-doors on the right.

"Just sit down, Lucius," Abraxas sighed from one of the armchairs before the unlit marble fireplace. "At this rate, you'll tire yourself out before our new heir's even been born."

Hermione scoffed from her seat on the floor by his feet, a cushioned mat laid out beneath her for Theodore to play on.

"As if *he's* the one who'll be tired," she said.

Lucius ignored them both and continued pacing the length of the small, coolly sophisticated parlour that connected his and Narcissa's rooms at Malfoy Manor. The tapestry-like wallpaper was a frosty blue, the rug at the centre was like the ice of a pond decorated in the swirling patterns left by skaters, the silver and marble accents glistened and gleamed, and the upholstery was akin to the white blankets of freshly fallen snow. It was as though the inspiration for the room had been drawn from a snowflake: beautiful, but cold.

"Don't pretend you were any different, Abraxas," Edmund said, lounging on the other armchair. He swung his tumbler of firewhiskey as he gestured to the stretch of waxed wooden

flooring between the bedroom doors. “I seem to remember you pacing right there yourself when Lucius was born.”

Abraxas waved him off and took a sip of his wine — Superior Red, proudly and unironically produced by the Malfoys themselves. He set the glass down on the cart at his side, picking up the bottle instead.

“Here, Lucius. For the nerves.”

Lucius hesitated, but the next scream to reach their ears seemed to make up his mind for him; he strode over to take the glass his father had poured him and sank into a spectacular collection of decorative pillows on the cabriole sofa on the right. Beside him, Rodolphus was smirking in amusement.

“Oh, you think it’s funny, do you?” Lucius snapped. “With any luck, it will be *your* wife we hear screaming in the other room next.”

“I hardly need the birth of an heir to hear my wife scream like that.”

“Good to know she does at least some of that for you.”

Rodolphus’ eyebrows rose. He held his own glass of wine aloft, tipping it just slightly.

“Don’t you dare spill that on my sofa,” hissed Lucius.

“Then don’t make such insinuations about my wife.”

“Insinuations? I’d thought it was fact.”

Just then, Cygnus Black entered from the corridor, returning from a trip to the powder room, and Lucius and Rodolphus clamped their mouths shut. Edmund moved wordlessly back to the loveseat.

“Any progress?” asked Cygnus, winding around the ottoman to retake the emptied armchair.

“None that we’ve been made aware of,” Abraxas told him. “Perhaps if we shout loud enough, Tavaris will hear and give us an answer.” He held up the bottle of wine in askance.

“Scotch,” said Cygnus, and he peered about as if a house-elf would appear with his drink at that alone. When none did, Abraxas called for Dobby; in under a minute, Dobby was placing a tumbler of Sorcerer's Smoking Scotch in Cygnus’ hand.

Perhaps mistaking him for Dinky, the second that Theodore shifted his attention from his toys to Dobby, he gave a happy squeal and got up on his hands and knees, rocking back and forth as though tempted to crawl.

“That’s not Dinky, love,” said Hermione, bending low and pointing at Dobby. “His name is Dobby. He works for the Malfoys.” *For now.*

“Ba-ba,” was Theodore’s nonsensical reply.

Casting a glance at Abraxas for permission, Dobby asked, in his high, squeaky voice, “Can Dobby be doing anything for young Master Nott?”

“Oh, he’s fine right now, but thank you, Dobby. That’s very kind of you to ask.”

He blinked at her, wearing the expression of one who was deep within a hallucination and wholly aware of it.

“Some refreshments for Lady Nott, Dobby. Now.”

Dobby started, springing back and nearly tripping on a wooden puzzling tower of colourful rings. “Yes — yes, Master,” he stuttered, “Dobby w—will.” He hastened to bow, then disappeared with a small *pop*.

“You and Tavaris ought to see about getting another house-elf,” said Edmund, looking down at Hermione. “Just two is hardly enough now that you have Theodore. Especially when one of them is preoccupied at another property half the time.”

“And you two shall surely be working on your spare soon,” said Cygnus, as though this was common knowledge. “Two children shall be far more than a single elf can manage without getting sloppy with its other duties.”

For a brief moment, Hermione felt as though someone had pressed a button on a remote to put her on pause. *A spare?*

“Indeed, you should see if anyone’s got an elf that’s had offspring of its own,” said Abraxas. “Simplest way to do it, I think. Then again, people do seem to enjoy gatekeeping those.”

“Like yourself?” said Edmund.

The resume button was pressed, and Hermione promptly threw a dragon-shaped rattle at Abraxas.

“They are not ‘that’s, nor are they ‘it’s or ‘those’s,” she said sharply. “Living beings, Abraxas; they are living beings. Use the appropriate pronouns.”

“You are exceedingly odd, Lady Nott,” remarked Cygnus, giving her a funny look. “Your behaviour never fails to confound me.”

“Thank you, Cygnus. Oh, Theodore, my love, no — that doesn’t go in your mouth, we’ve got a teething ring for that.”

“Has Tavaris spoken to you yet about his getting on with a spare?”

Hermione paused again, a teething ring in one hand and a stuffed Niffler with slobbery paws in the other. However, the question had not been directed at her.

“No, he has not,” answered Abraxas.

“Spares are crucial to the security of one’s bloodline,” continued Cygnus, after swallowing a tellingly long sip of his scotch. “An absolute necessity. One should ensure they have as many spares as possible, in my opinion.”

“That isn’t always doable, unfortunately,” said Abraxas grimly, his eyes flitting to Narcissa’s closed bedroom doors. Lucius’ shoulders went taut. “The efforts to secure even one spare can often have … dire consequences.”

Theodore began whining, falling back onto his bottom. He flailed his arms around in an attempt to take back the stuffed Niffler. Hermione stuck the teething ring in his mouth and placed the Niffler on his lap, all the while wondering what Abraxas meant by that. Had Evangeline suffered a miscarriage trying to conceive a second child? It seemed the most likely answer.

Dobby returned then, carrying a silver tray laden with a pitcher of lemonade, an ice-filled glass, and a crystal bowl of fresh fruit. He placed the tray upon the ottoman.

“Here you is, Lady Nott.”

“Thank you, Dobby,” said Hermione softly. “This looks wonderful.”

“So *odd*,” said Cygnus again, in a mystified voice.

She ignored him, mechanically popping a cube of watermelon into her mouth to show Dobby that she was pleased with the snack he had brought her. He smiled shyly at her enjoyment, appearing almost bashful, but he teetered back and forth on the balls of his feet, nonetheless, twisting his hands and throwing anxious glances at Abraxas.

As the men in the room carried on with their talk of heirs and spares, a cold dread crept along Hermione’s skin. There would be no further sons to act as spares for House Nott, nor any daughters to be married off; Theodore had no siblings. Knowing this fact did not subside the chilling emptiness in her stomach, though, because it merely meant no other children conceived would survive past birth. If Tavaris decided he wanted a spare, she would be forced to comply.

Any decision regarding her body was not her own to make.

A while later, one of the doors to Narcissa’s bedroom swung open to let out Desdemona Lestrange. A far less muffled scream than the ones to precede it leapt from wall to wall, making Cygnus grimace. Lucius flinched so badly that wine sloshed onto the sofa cushions.

“*Stop looking, Bella, or so help me I will drown you in the pond out back*!”

“Cissa, my darling baby girl, it’s almost over, you have almost done it! I did this three times myself —”

“*I DON’T WANT TO HEAR HOW MANY TIMES YOU HAVE DONE THIS*! *GET HER AWAY FROM THERE*, *MOTHER*!”

“Oh, look, you can see the blond past the blood!”

Desdemona shut the door, for which everyone was grateful.

“Tavaris ran out of pages, he says. He’s requested a new book.”

“He’s in there *reading*?” said Cygnus incredulously, as Dobby began to frantically clean up the spilled wine.

“I told him he wasn’t allowed to look until Narcissa was decent again,” said Hermione, her voice sounding hollow even to her own ears. She rummaged through the large, white leather bag propped up against Abraxas’ chair. “Here, I brought a back-up for him.”

She held out her copy of *Hairy Snout, Human Heart*.

“Of course,” muttered Desdemona, rolling her eyes at the cover. She made for the doors, but before slipping away, she added over her shoulder, “It shouldn’t be long now; she’s begun crowning.”

Lucius stared after her in horror, his face a sickly green.

“Crowning?” he whispered.

“They know he’s blond,” said Rodolphus helpfully.

It took another hour for Narcissa’s bedroom doors to reopen. This time, it was Tavaris who stepped out, and he did so grinning.

“Congratulations,” he said, looking at Abraxas and Lucius in turn. “He’s blond.”

Lucius bolted past him, Cygnus following at a moderately more sedate pace. Abraxas, Edmund, and Rodolphus downed the rest of their drinks first.

“Oh, and, Mione, darling?” said Tavaris, as Hermione stood, hefting Theodore onto her hip. He waved *Hairy Snout, Human Heart* at her, then tossed it in the hearth. The next second, he had drawn his wand and set it on fire.

She sighed, drained. “What did that poor book ever do to you?”

“Don’t be a hypocrite, you did the very same with the *Ancient Wizarding Traditions* series. Now come. It’s time to meet Heir Draco Malfoy.”

Narcissa’s bedroom was flooded with sunlight, the blue linen curtains drawn back, and the windows thrown open, letting in the sweet June breeze to freshen the air and lure the hangings on her four-poster bed into a whimsical dance. Narcissa was propped up by a mountain of silk-encased pillows, her hair pulled back into a neat plait that had undoubtedly been redone prior to the doors opening, and on her tired, glowing face was the softest of smiles, directed in its entirety at the tiny, swaddled infant in her arms.

Draco.

“He’s a fine heir, Lord Malfoy,” Healer Gibbon said, as she shoved a bundle of bloodied sheets onto another of the Malfoys’ house-elves, Lopsi, making her teeter under their weight. “Being on the earlier side, he *is* a bit small, similar to this one —”

“I’ll thank you not to point fingers at my son, Gibbon.”

She flushed. “My apologies, Lady Nott,” she said tightly. “I meant no off—”

“You can go now.”

“Yes, please, leave us, Hatley,” said Evangeline, without bothering to look up. “Thank you for your assistance today.”

“Mother, look at him,” said Narcissa, in a hushed voice, as both Healer Gibbon and the midwife strode from the room. “Is he not the most precious thing you’ve ever seen?”

Druella Black was also smiling down at Draco, captivated by the very sight of him. She was perched on the mattress beside her daughter, with Cygnus standing as close as he could without climbing onto the bed.

“He’s beyond precious, my darling girl,” said Druella; “he’s perfect.”

Rodolphus had a squinty look on his face like he was attempting to calculate how Draco could have so swiftly reached this so-called perfection. Behind her at the foot of the bed, Hermione heard Edmund whisper, “Mark my words, we’ll be hearing about how perfect he is for as long as one of them is still around to tell us.”

“Raised by this lot, he’ll learn to tell us himself before long,” Tavaris whispered back.

Hermione came close to smiling. *He’s not wrong,* she thought.

“He’s the most marvellous nephew I could have asked for!” proclaimed Bellatrix.

Edmund snickered. With practised subtlety, Desdemona swatted him on the arm.

“And with a traditional Black name, too,” said Cygnus proudly. “It shall fit nicely on our tapestry. Well done, Narcissa. The family will be most pleased.”

“Indeed, Father,” said Bellatrix, with an equal amount of pride. She leaned in closer with a smirk, lowering her voice to a sly undertone that was still easily overheard in the quiet of the room. “Little Draco shall take after his father, though, and *his* father before him.”

To the better part of the room, her meaning was clear. Within seconds, Narcissa's smile had frozen, and her face had drained of the little colour it possessed.

“He shall, shan’t he?” murmured Lucius, sounding as though he were in a trance as he peered at Draco over Bellatrix’s shoulder.

“His power will bring House Malfoy great honour and prestige,” said Abraxas confidently, “of that, I am certain.”

Narcissa lifted her gaze for what Hermione suspected was the first time since Draco had been placed in her arms. Her eyes flitted over the other occupants of the room with a trace of mounting panic, a sheen misting over them and building with every second she failed to find what she was searching for. Finally, she said, in a wavering voice, "Mione! Mione, come — come meet him! Mother, make room for her."

Taken aback, it took Hermione a moment to move. She weighed her comfortability regarding whom she might let hold Theodore, then passed him to Evangeline as she approached the side of the bed. Druella shifted closer to the headboard to let her sit.

Narcissa was smiling again, but it was all wrong; tears fled to trickle down her cheeks and her lips kept wobbling as though to be stretched was costing them too much effort.

"Would you like to hold him?"

Hermione was not given the opportunity to either accept or decline before she found herself with an armful of whining infant. With the cool unease that lingered on her arms and the back of her neck, she had never been more terrified to be holding a baby. Would she be forced to hold one of her own again? One who was deathly still?

"He's lovely, isn't he?" said Narcissa breathlessly. "Draco Lucius Malfoy. It's a fine name, don't you think? A fine name for a fine boy. You'll be godmother, won't you?"

Hermione's jaw dropped.

"Narcissa, darling," said Cygnus, with an edge of uncertainty, "are you *quite* sure you want *her* to take on that position?"

"I thought *I* was to be his godmother," said Bellatrix, affronted. She shot Hermione a dark look. "She's technically already Lucius's godmother, anyway, is she not?"

"Pardon me?"

"What of it, Bella?" countered Narcissa. "Lucius has long since been of age. He no longer has any need of godparents, beyond the benefits of the title."

Lucius narrowed his eyes shrewdly, first at her and then at Hermione. "Yes," he said after a moment, appearing to have cottoned on to something. "I think Mione would be an excellent choice."

Narcissa ducked her head, forcing Hermione to meet her gaze. "Will you accept? Will you do us the honour of being his godmother?"

"Erm — I —"

"You will," she decided. Her voice wavered more strongly as she continued, her expression becoming painfully beseeching. "And you'll love him. You'll love my son like you love your own. Promise me that you'll love him, Mione."

A lump formed in Hermione's throat. She looked down at Draco, his small face all wrinkled and rosy, his not-yet-pointy nose scrunched up and his eyes still squeezed tightly shut, hiding their lack of pigment, and his hair like that of an angel, fine strands of pale blond that stuck to the top of his head. He was so undamaged, unharmed, so wonderfully unprejudiced, and blissfully unaware, so in need of protection —

Oh, she thought, a sinking feeling in her chest as she, too, cottoned on to what Narcissa was asking of her.

Protect my son like you protect your own.

Looking into the eyes of a fellow mother, knowing and understanding the all-consuming fear she currently felt for her child, there was only one way Hermione could respond, regardless of how she might have felt about it. Suppressing a sigh, she whispered, "I promise."

Draco's birth was formally celebrated exactly one month later, on the fifth of July, and was held on the sprawling green lawn behind Malfoy Manor, amidst the manicured gardens and under the light of the afternoon sun which peeked over the abundance of cotton-like clouds scattered about the pale-blue sky.

There was a long, white-clothed buffet table that stretched the length of a hedge whose roses had been Charmed to bloom on a never-ending loop, their white petals opening and closing with soft flutters that appeared to have eight-year-old Pippa Macmillan utterly enraptured. Numerous smaller tables surrounded the buffet for the benefit of any guests who wished to rest their feet while they chatted, snacked, or — in the case of Cassiopeia Black — slipped into a light doze while a house-elf attempted to fan away their hot flashes. More ever-blooming roses made up the centrepieces on each one, ten per table and all of them mingling with white carnations and baby's breath.

A string band had been set up before a marble fountain at the very centre of the gardens, petals floating on the surface of the crystalline water and the music racks decorated with winding vines that may or may not have been creepers. There was no dance floor, for this was not a dance, but in front of the band seemed to be the most popular place for guests to mill about, flutes of fizzling Beau Champagne or glasses of elderflower-lemonade in hand, served to them by wandering house-elves with silver trays.

Finally, just before the small pond home to half a dozen swans, about one hundred yards from the grand back doors of the manor, an open white marquee had been erected, under which were pale sofas and chairs, a drink cart, a massive table for presents, a periwinkle bassinet, and a rug that looked too expensive to risk anyone treading on it with their shoes on.

To Narcissa's dismay, that July just so happened to be one of the coolest ever recorded; fine for being outside, but not quite the summer warmth she had counted on.

"Really, this could have easily been moved indoors," Irma Black said from her spot beneath the marquee. "So silly of her to have not accommodated the weather."

"When Narcissa puts her mind to something, she tends to stick to it," said Pollux Black, nursing a brandy beside her on the sofa. "She's like her grandmother that way."

Irma turned to him with her eyebrows halfway up her wrinkled forehead. “I know you are not implying it is the *Crabbe* blood that caused our grandchildren's stubbornness.”

Tavaris did a very good job at smothering a laugh. Truly, Hermione thought she was probably the only one who heard it.

“Enough,” said Melania Black, in a light, happy voice. The smile on her lips seemed to be there solely so that no one who looked their way would spot anything amiss. “There are certain subjects which ought to be kept behind closed doors, Irma, and that is one of them.”

“What subject must be kept behind closed doors?” asked Bellatrix curiously, wandering over with Rodolphus.

Hermione drew Theodore closer on her lap. He noticed neither the adjustment nor the danger of Bellatrix’s proximity, distracted as he was by the stuffed Swedish Short-Snout that Tavaris had Charmed to fly leisurely overhead.

“All of them,” replied Melania.

For a second, Bellatrix got a strangely disquieting look in her eyes, then she blinked and, in an innocent voice not one person would ever fall for, said, “Such as the matter of Angus Mulciber’s missing toe?”

Rodolphus choked on his champagne.

Melania sacrificed her crowd-pleasing smile to give the pair an unimpressed look. “Such as the child whose arrival we have all spent seven years awaiting, Bellatrix,” she said coolly. “Arcturus told me of his disappointment before he passed.”

Bellatrix stiffened.

“Let’s move on, Bella,” said Rodolphus, wiping his chin with his sleeve. Taking her arm, he began to steer her away. “I want a better view of Lucius and Abraxas preening like peacocks every time someone congratulates them.”

“Oh,” Hermione murmured in surprise. She scanned the surrounding gardens, craning her neck, and failed to find a single albino peacock. “Oh, my God.”

Irma shot her a disdainful look on account of the phrase.

“What is it?” asked Tavaris.

“You know what these gardens are missing? Peacocks.”

“*Peacocks*?”

“About a dozen or so albino peacocks,” said Hermione, starting to grin. “To strut about the grounds when the Malfoys are too busy to do it themselves.”

He didn't bother to hide his laugh this time. Even Pollux began howling. None of them realised five-year-old Marcus Flint had crept up on them until Theodore let out a loud, unhappy cry.

Marcus' head was spotted poking out from behind Melania's chair; he had a big grin plastered across his face as he waved the stuffed Short-Snout about in triumph.

"That does not belong to you, Mr Flint," said Tavaris, before Hermione could say just that herself. "I suggest you give it back."

"Heir Nott didn't even *try* to stop me!" said Marcus. "I won it! That means it's mine now!"

"Where are your parents?" asked Hermione.

"*Marcus*!" As if she had summoned him, Emil Flint came storming over from where he and his wife had been congratulating the Malfoys on the other side of the marquee. He tore the Short-Snout from his son's grasp and smacked him upside the head. "You do not take things from Heir Nott, understand? *Never*!"

Theodore was not the only one crying now.

"I apologise for my son's lack of forethought," Flint continued, turning to Hermione and Tavaris. "If I may?" he added, gesturing to Theodore with the Short-Snout.

Theodore was already sticking his hands out for it, wiggling restlessly in her lap. Hermione inclined her head, apprehensive.

Lowering himself onto one knee, Flint returned the Short-Snout with unexpected care. He watched Theodore hug it to himself, letting out tiny hiccoughing-sobs.

"I must beg your forgiveness, Lady Nott. My son didn't know any better. I assure you that he will never make the same mistake again."

She felt Tavaris go rigid. For a long moment, she didn't say anything. It was unnerving to have someone kneel before her like this, begging for forgiveness on behalf of their child, acting as though they were at her mercy. The sight chilled her.

"No forgiveness necessary, Mr Flint," she said finally. "These things happen with children. Just teach your son not to take what isn't his and we won't have a problem."

"Yes, of course," said Flint gratefully. "Thank you for being so understanding, Lady Nott." With that, he got up, grabbed his wailing son by the arm, and dragged him back to his mother.

Hermione, Tavaris, and the three Blacks watched the Flints re-join the meandering guests outside the marquee, Olena Flint glancing back at them worriedly as her husband hissed in her ear.

"What on earth just happened?"

Tavaris swallowed the rest of his champagne, his lips twisting bitterly.

“You convinced him that you are a … *merciful Lady*.”

They were summoned for photographs before Hermione could even begin to digest what that meant.

The afternoon continued in much the same theme, with people who had once stuck their noses up at Hermione now tripping over themselves to gain her approval, and people who had openly questioned her presence among their prejudiced little society suddenly acting as though they were old friends. It was enough to bring that cold dread back to her skin — enough to keep it there.

“Lady Nott, how *splendid* it is to see you out and about,” Euphemia Rowle said, with a smile that stretched her face to an unnatural degree. “I do hope this means you’ll be joining us more often now?”

“Oh, you *must*,” said Fiona Selwyn, Evan’s older sister. “Us witches, we take turns hosting a tea on the first Sunday of every second month; there are currently thirty-six of us, and I happen to think *thirty-seven* is a much nicer number.”

“Yes, and it would be of no difficulty whatsoever to fit you in,” said Rohesia Selwyn, her mother-in-law, nodding profusely. “We lost a member very recently, you see — after poor Lady Potter passed away.”

“It sounds like quite the commitment,” said Hermione, trying very hard to think of an excuse as to why she would never attend their tea parties. “Now that I have Theodore —”

“Oh, but you can just leave him in the care of your house-elves,” dismissed Lidwina Rowle, Euphemia’s mother-in-law. “That’s what the rest of us do, in any case.”

“I suppose we *could* make an exception,” said Fiona slowly, with a pointed look at the others. “Since it’s Heir Nott.”

All four of them looked at Theodore, who appeared to be sizing them up from Hermione’s hip, a tiny frown on his face.

“Very true,” Lidwina agreed quickly.

“Madam Alice Longbottom used to attend,” said Rohesia, with feigned nonchalance. “Before she … you know … took herself off the map … Her mother-in-law is still a member, though. She hosted back in September.”

“Lady and Madam Malfoy are both members as well,” Euphemia put in, giving Hermione what she probably thought was an encouraging smile and not that of a hungry harpy.

“How lovely,” said Hermione insincerely, “but speaking of Lady and Madam Malfoy, I really must be getting back to them.”

She walked away before they could make any further attempts to persuade her, allowing herself a deep breath once her back was turned. Theodore’s frown became more pronounced, leaving a slight wrinkle between his brows.

Upon spotting their approach, Narcissa grew visibly eager, causing the cold embracing Hermione to worsen.

“Ah, here she comes now. You heard, of course, that Lady Mione was named Draco’s godmother?” she said to the Carrows. “She absolutely adores him.”

Hermione came to stand beside her, adjusting Theodore on her hip when he started to slip. He hung on to the front of her robes as he leaned closer to Narcissa, trying to get a better look at Draco.

“I see,” Elric said, at length.

“I don’t doubt he and Heir Theodore will grow to be the dearest of friends,” Narcissa went on airily, flashing them all a dazzling smile. “Almost like brothers, one might say. Wouldn’t you agree, Lady Mione?”

Protect my son like you protect your own.

“Of course,” said Hermione dutifully. “Considering how much time our two families spend in one another's company, I would hardly be surprised if Theodore and Heir Draco got confused and started believing they really *are* brothers.”

Lucius nodded, half-agreeing and half-approving. His chin was raised unnecessarily high.

Elric’s wife, Juniper, piped up to introduce Hermione to their daughters, two-year-old twins Flora and Hestia, then proceeded to talk about how all their children would be in Slytherin House together when they got to Hogwarts.

“It is a comforting thought, isn't it, Lady Nott?” Juniper said. “The idea that our children will be able to look out for one another when we aren’t present to do it ourselves?”

Similar versions of that exact statement were repeated by several more parents throughout the following few hours.

“Care about my child,” each one of them was silently begging. “Have mercy on them if I make a mistake. Fight for them when I cannot.”

That they all seemed to think Hermione had influence enough to keep their children from harm should they find themselves facing the Dark Lord’s wrath made her want to retreat to the Nott Estate and never show her face in public again. She shuddered to imagine how Theodore must have been treated in his time at Hogwarts if these rumours had and would continue circulating.

And it was this which made her finally realise, with no shortage of horror, what she should have back in January.

Rumours of the Dark Lord having a child had circulated long before Delphini Riddle had been identified. The story most widely believed, most whispered from ear to ear and most alluded to in the *Prophet* — the implication printed again and again until it was being written outright — had seen Scorpius Malfoy bullied by everyone he encountered, even in Slytherin

House, leaving him friendless save for Albus Severus. For a boy who bore such a close resemblance to his father, it was difficult to comprehend how so many people could believe his father and grandfather had sent his mother back in time to secure House Malfoy a powerful heir from the Dark Lord himself.

But the rumours, Hermione now realised, had not originated with Scorpius; they had originated with Theodore. Worse, the time-travel aspect of the story rang true.

That was what scared her the most.

For several nights on end, she laid awake going over nearly every moment of her time in the past to find her mistake — what she could have possibly done to reveal herself to someone, anyone — but no matter how many days arrived with no rest to separate them, she could not pinpoint the moment she had messed up. Hermione had told one person the truth: Professor Dumbledore. Beyond that, she was protected by Occlumency, leaving no feasible way that the time-travel aspect of the story could have come from the knowledge of the reality of her existence.

She remained unsettled, nonetheless.

One evening in mid-July, when Hermione came close to nodding off during dinner, Tavaris threatened to have Dinky feed her a Sleeping Draught. It dragged thoughts of heirs and spares back to the surface of her mind, and she could not force an argument from her throat, for none was there to begin with; this was not something she could fight. Even so, she tried harder than ever to make herself sleep that night. She thought perhaps if she sang to Theodore, like she always did, and really concentrated on the lyrics, the song might have the power to lull her to sleep, too, so that was what she tried first.

"*When the dog bites, when the bee stings*

When I'm feeling sad

I simply remember my favourite things

And then I don't feel so bad…"

When both Theodore and Crookshanks drifted off without her, Hermione tried to think of her own favourite things instead. She reasoned that even if it did not work, it would at least serve as a good way to distract herself.

She thought of Rose going to sleep each night snuggling a stuffed Jack Russell Terrier, long adored for being the same as her father's Patronus, and of the weekend mornings that Hugo and herself would spend reading on the sitting-room sofa, pausing every few minutes to share something they had learnt or else thought the other might possibly find interesting.

She thought of the way Ron slept with his long, freckled arms flung around her as though they were tentacles, a funny-looking scar on one of them left behind by real ones, and of all the times he would follow her down for breakfast to sit with her until she had to leave for work, even when he was still half-asleep.

She thought of the basement flat beneath their townhouse that they rented out to Teddy and Victoire so that the two of them could afford a place to call their own amid the housing crisis, and of how the pair rushed upstairs each weekday morning to Floo to work before she left and Ron went back to sleep because Victoire loathed Apparating.

She thought of Harry kicking things when he got angry, then hopping about on one foot like he was surprised to find it had hurt, and of Ginny casting her signature Bat-Bogey Hex on Rita Skeeter whilst broadcasting live at the 2014 Quidditch World Cup.

She thought of the stress balls her father would bring home for her mother, and of how he kept doing it despite her mother throwing them at him every time, claiming she had no need of them, because he knew even that helped her get her frustration out.

She thought of James Sirius poking her repeatedly whenever he wanted to get her attention, even after he learned how to accomplish it with words, and of the little stained-glass window in Albus Severus' bedroom which depicted the Forbidden Forest at Hogwarts.

She thought of the house-elves whom she got to watch learn how to speak up when they wanted something, for no other reason than that they wanted it; of Crookshanks' love for napping under the Christmas tree whenever it was up; of Molly Weasley's cooking and Arthur Weasley's questions about the Muggle world; and of the cheeky smirk Lily Luna gave her whenever she shared the tall tales told to her by her godmother.

But no matter how many of her favourite things Hermione thought of, she still worried that she would soon be ordered to deliver a spare who would never see the light of day, still asked herself why she was being treated with the deference that she was by the other Death Eaters and their wives, still imagined the vision that the Dark Lord had forced upon Tavaris all those months ago, and still wondered what colour Tavaris had expected Theodore's eyes to be when they had returned home that night.

Red, like the Dark Lord's, or another colour, like Tom Riddle's?

Warm cups of tea made with love; visits to Hagrid's Hut; books so old they would fall apart if not treated with care; a dozen tubes of spearmint toothpaste hidden inside her school trunk because her mother always worried she would run out; the smell of the front lawn of her childhood home the day her father let her try mowing it herself, the same day Professor McGonagall came to deliver her Hogwarts acceptance letter — none of these thoughts succeeded in keeping the others at bay.

Hermione's favourite things did not stop her from wondering why Moody, too, would have expected Theodore's eyes to belong to someone other than Tavaris.

"Not even a little hiss?"

When she finally did accomplish some sleep, she dreamt of a duelling platform in the Great Hall of Hogwarts Castle, except this time, when Draco Conjured a snake, Harry was not the one who spoke to it.

The following morning, Hermione discovered that she was not the only one to have had trouble sleeping. As a matter of fact, she doubted that Tavaris had slept at all.

He was sitting on the second last step of the wide, turning staircase, still in his clothes from the day before, and did not move even to turn his head when her footsteps sounded clearly from behind him. As she neared, Theodore on her hip and Crookshanks at her heels, she spotted his walking-stick laying discarded on the floor a metre away from him.

“Tavaris?” she said tentatively.

No response came.

Hermione stopped just before the foot of the stairs. For once, Crookshanks did not immediately run ahead to visit Billy Stubbs; he, too, stopped, and he laid himself out on the floor between Tavaris’ legs, looking up at him intently.

At Tavaris’ feet was a crystal decanter with scarcely a sip of drink left.

Sucking in a breath, she descended the last couple of steps and carefully lowered herself to sit beside him. Theodore squirmed impatiently at the sight of his father, babbling, trying to wriggle out of her arms to get to him; she only held him tighter. The babbling, however, finally drew Tavaris’ attention.

He looked dreadful. His robes were rumpled, his tie loosened, the first few buttons of his shirt undone, and the dark stubble across his jaw had grown back over the course of the night. His eyes were disconcertingly quiet, their lids drooping at the corners. His voice was hardly more than a croak.

“You know, everyone keeps asking me when we’re gonna start planning for our spare.”

Hermione’s wariness deepened as Tavaris gave a hoarse, humourless chuckle that made him sway slightly to one side.

“Can’t imagine why *I’m* the one they’re asking,” he said, slurring a little. “S’not like any of them think it’d be *me* getting my wife pregnant … No, that’s not *my* job, they don’t think … no, sir, not mine …” He trailed off, chuckling again.

“Tavaris —”

“You want to hear something funny?”

Hermione arranged both herself and Theodore into a more comfortable position, thinking they would probably be there for a while.

“Sure,” she sighed.

“Remember when Moody warned us what would happen if we — how’d he put it — found ourselves the unlucky sods at the wrong end of his wand? D’you remember that?”

Hermione stared at him, fearing she already knew where this was leading.

“I do.”

“Well,” said Tavaris, “the bastard was right.”

“What do you mean by that?”

He cracked up once more, swaying right into the wooden railing beside him. Then he abruptly stopped laughing.

“Elias is dead.”

“Elias?” repeated Hermione, taken aback. She had thought he was going to say Evan. But, of course, if it were Evan who had died, Tavaris would not be in such a state.

“Yes,” said Tavaris hoarsely, staring out into the dim front hall. Tiny bits of coloured light sprinkled the floor to their right, cast by the morning sun through the massive mosaic of stained glass above the stairwell. “The owl came shortly after dinner last night. Moody killed him.”

She had no idea how to respond to that. It was not as though she was sorry for his loss, and even if she claimed to be, he wouldn’t believe her; Elias Avery was not someone she would ever mourn. After all, it was him and Geoffrey Mulciber who had stolen her away from Hogwarts two years ago. Somehow, though, someway, she still felt rather bad.

So, Hermione did the one truthful thing she could do to comfort him.

“It’s a shame Dolohov wasn’t available to be used as a human shield.”

Tavaris gave another chuckle, and this time, there was mirth in it. His eyes were just a little brighter when he tilted his head to look at her again.

“Maybe next time, darling,” he said.

It was not until Abraxas came through the now functioning sitting-room Floo about an hour later, looking quite terrible himself, that they learned Moody had not exactly walked away from the fight, either; he had been transported to St Mungo’s Hospital on a stretcher, after Geoffrey had severed his left leg. According to Abraxas, Geoffrey had been aiming for Moody’s neck. Although Hermione loathed Geoffrey, she could not find it in herself to blame him. If it were her own best friend who had dropped dead in front of her — if it were Harry, and he had actually stayed dead — she, too, would likely start trying to behead the people responsible.

The tabletop clock that rested among the framed photographs and the vase of lilies on the nearby side table read nine o’clock. She stared at it for a minute, struck dumb, for it never ceased to boggle her how so much could happen in so little time. She, Tavaris, and Abraxas soon moved to the informal dining room to take breakfast together, because the latter two were in need of a full English to soak up the alcohol in their systems, and because the former’s back had begun to berate her for leaning against the hard steps.

“Gaspar eloped with Bedelia Greengrass at a ghastly hour this morning,” Abraxas informed them both in a rough voice, as Dinky began serving the tea. “The two of them have since made off on their honeymoon.”

“That doesn’t sound particularly wise of them,” said Hermione. She paused to slip a dummy into Theodore’s mouth to stop him from gnawing on her wedding ring; chewing diamonds would do his new top incisors no favours. “Running away will only serve to make them look more suspicious, and Bedelia hasn’t even done anything wrong.”

“True, but now the Aurors’ll need to wait for the Wizengamot to sign off on a search warrant,” explained Abraxas, stabbing a lump of eggs with his fork, “since the new Lord Avery won’t be here to give them permission. This allows Esther and the elves more time to hide what needs hiding.” His eyes dropped to the eggs, a greyish tinge in his cheeks, and he put his fork down in defeat.

Tavaris managed a few more bites than him, but that his elbows were propped up on the table was a sure sign of how horrid he, too, must have been feeling.

“They’ve not gone to any property of their own, have they?”

“One of the Parkinsons’.”

“Good, not great,” sighed Tavaris, slumping back in his seat. “They know Madam Parkinson is Gaspar’s sister; Aurelia will be third on their list for questioning. And Miss Parkinson, the elder, is Bedelia’s closest friend. Only the most troll-brained Auror wouldn’t think to search a Parkinson property.”

Hermione frowned, dragging the bowl of mushy bananas that Dinky had put out closer to herself. She did not like being reminded that she was related to the Averys. Then again, she was probably related to most of the Sacred Twenty-Eight at this point, and had been in the future, to a degree, although it was more easily ignorable then, given how few people regarded the Weasleys as pure.

“Do they plan on holding off on the funeral until Gaspar and Bedelia return?” she asked, as she transferred Theodore to the highchair between Tavaris and herself. She placed the bowl in front of him and, immediately exasperated, picked up the small, engraved spoon that had come with it. “For heaven’s sake, Dinky, he doesn’t need his silver spoon every time he eats.”

Dinky gave her a look that could only be described as haughty. “Master Theodore must be learning to have standards.”

Hermione rolled her eyes.

“The funeral will be postponed, yes. Esther will wait until both the house in Phillimore Gardens and the summer home in Saltash are cleared for Ministry eyes, and then Gaspar and Bedelia will ‘receive word’ of Elias’s …” Abraxas trailed off, rubbing his face with both hands.

Theodore spat out his first spoonful of squashed banana, but not seemingly due to any real distaste for it; rather than gagging dramatically, he made a questioning noise.

“Yes, Theodore?” said Tavaris, softening.

Theodore made another wordless inquiry to his father, this one sounding a tad impatient. He flapped his hand to fend off another oncoming spoonful.

“I think he wants to know why you seem so down this morning,” said Hermione, putting down the spoon. She smoothed back an errant lock of Theodore’s fine, dark hair. “Is that it, my love? You wish to know why Abraxas and your pa are feeling a little bit sad?”

He did not appear to understand any of that, but he stopped making noises as if thinking her words might have been the answer he had been looking for.

“Pa?” said Tavaris flatly.

She shrugged one shoulder. “Why not? You *are* old enough to be his grandfather.”

Abraxas sniggered drowsily.

“Fuck off,” muttered Tavaris.

“Fa-uh,” repeated Theodore.

All three of them gaped at him. He grinned proudly, evidently pleased with himself. Slowly, Tavaris and Abraxas began to brighten, grins of their own creeping onto their lips.

“That doesn’t count,” said Hermione quickly. “He was copying what he heard — the sound, that’s all. It just means you’ve all got to watch your language from now on.”

“Oh, no, we’re definitely counting it.”

“It’s simply too good not to.”

“It’ll be months still before he really says his first words! This does *not* count!”

Tavaris leaned closer with a smirk. “Theodore,” he whispered. “Fuck off.”

“Fa-uh!”

Hermione glared at them all.

*

Elias Avery’s funeral took place on the twenty-first of the month, after five days of near constant coverage from the *Prophet* on both his fight with Moody and the apparently overwhelming shock that a member of the Wizengamot had been involved with the Death Eaters. Even though she now had the freedom to, Hermione did not attend the funeral, for

travelling anywhere that Theodore could not join her was presently out of the question. She did, however, bear witness to one of sorts.

In the warm evening light of the sitting room, the five remaining wizards to have emerged from Slytherin House in 1945 sat in a sullen silence, drinking to the memory of their fallen member. Geoffrey was slumped against the sofa nearest the fireplace, his head lolling along the back of it whilst he stared darkly at the empty cushion beside him. As if to avoid filling that exact spot, Tavaris, Abraxas, and Edmund had taken up the sofa opposite, occasionally exchanging commiserating looks, but mostly watching the level of liquid in their tumblers repeatedly lower to nothingness. Lastly, on the armchair, jerkily knocking about the ice in his drink, was the Dark Lord, who just looked peeved.

That was, until he spotted Hermione, who had stopped on her way out of the informal dining room to hover curiously in the archway with Theodore.

“You must be feeling so very pleased right now,” the Dark Lord said in a low, crawling voice. As they narrowed at her, his eyes resembled the blistering red of burning coal. “I bet you’ve been dreaming of a moment like this.”

“I dream of plenty happier things than something like this,” Hermione told him.

“A most profound lie.”

True, she thought, although outwardly she stood her ground. She did not much dream about anything happy.

It was obvious that the Dark Lord had more to say, more outrage over the death of one of his oldest followers to take out on the easiest target currently available to him, and that not one word of it would be welcomed by her ears; however, in the quiet between one underlying threat and another, they heard a sharp rapping at the front doors.

“Who else are you expecting?”

Tavaris, Abraxas, and Edmund exchanged another look.

“Gaspar, do you think?” suggested Abraxas, but he sounded doubtful.

“It’s most likely Barty with an update on the investigation,” said Tavaris dismissively.

The Dark Lord twirled his tumbler again, causing the rocks of ice to *clink* as they collided. “For his sake, Tavaris, I hope you’re right. I have been expecting a report from him for a few days now.”

“Answer it, darling.”

Hermione turned and strode out into the front hall, thinking that she should have just fed Theodore his dinner upstairs. He was already half-asleep, his face buried in the crook of her neck while he drooled.

“This will only take a moment, my love,” she promised, “and then we’ll get you all clean and ready for bed.”

He mumbled something in response — it didn’t really matter what — and did his best to snuggle closer. She rubbed his back soothingly, then dropped her hand to grasp one of the silver door handles and yank it towards herself, pulling open one door.

It took Hermione less than a second to register what she was looking at, and then her heart stopped.

There were two young men dressed in the maroon robes of an Auror standing at the top of the stone steps before her, both of whom were broad-shouldered and burly, with pale, freckled faces, strong jaws, and thick locks of flaming, red hair that curled round their ears. They were identical: a mirror image of a mirror image that she had not seen reflected in over twenty years. It was like looking at a ghost who had spontaneously re-joined the living, except there were two of them and it was impossible to decipher which was supposed to be dead.

But this was not Fred and George; neither of these twins were destined to remain among the living.

“Lady Mione Nott, I presume?” said the one on the right, raising an eyebrow. He glanced sideways at his brother, who was eyeing her closely. “We’re Aurors Gideon and Fabian Prewett. We’ve come to ask your husband a few questions regarding the late Elias Avery. Is he home?”

Hermione stared at them, certain that her mouth was hanging open but unable to close it; she was frozen, her lungs refusing to expand. The only reason she knew that her heart had resumed beating was that it was now thundering painfully against her chest.

These were the great-uncles whom her children and nieces and nephews back in the future had never met. These were the uncles whom her brothers-in-law had almost no memory of, and of whom her husband and sister-in-law had none. These were members of her family.

These people have seen Ron.

“Lady Nott?” said the one on the left expectantly.

Based on old photographs that she had seen long ago, she thought he might have been Fabian, but with her vision growing increasingly blurred, she could not find a single difference between them to confirm it.

“Do you plan on letting us in anytime soon or are you just going to stand there gaping like an especially thick troll?”

“Excuse me,” said another voice, which sounded far friendlier than Hermione had ever heard it. The Prewett brothers made room for Barty to squeeze his way between them. He was holding on to a briefcase much like a smaller version of his father’s. “Good evening, Lady Nott. And Heir Nott, of course. Oh, my, he’s really grown since I saw him last.”

Barty had on a perfunctory yet charming smile, acting for all the world as though nothing was amiss, but the lack of colour in his cheeks said that he knew precisely how much trouble he was going to be in for not providing a warning about this. He would be shaking if he were aware of the Dark Lord's presence in the next room.

Hermione felt her eyes widen impossibly further. *The Dark Lord is in the next room.*

"Erm — I — ah —" She broke off, searching desperately for real words as her eyes continued watering. Still held in the crook of her arm, Theodore was beginning to whimper. "F—forgive me, you just — you both look so much like someone I u—used to know."

"It's the hair, isn't it?" said Barty gently, giving her an excuse to turn the sob bubbling up her throat into a laugh.

"P—perhaps," she sniffled, with a watery smile, relinquishing her grasp on the door handle to wipe at her eyes. She then returned to rubbing Theodore's back to keep his whimpers from escalating to all-out wails. "Nevertheless, I am — *sorry*. And as for your question, I'm afraid my husband is —"

"Elsewhere?" asked the Prewett on the right.

Hermione shook her head.

"Indisposed."

"Is that so?" said the Prewett on the left, blatantly unconvinced. "Are you sure he can't speak with us, even for a few minutes?"

The door began to swing inwards without her holding it; the one on the right, possibly Gideon, stuck his foot out to stop it.

"It really shouldn't take very long," he said. "Unless — oh, I see the problem. Your husband must have company, is that right?"

"Your son's father, perhaps?" said his brother innocently.

Barty was now the one who was left gaping, either because of the audacity with which that implication had been made or because he had not expected an Order member to be the one to make it. Whatever the reason, Hermione did not care. All that mattered was that the implication hurt a thousand times more when it was coming from someone who looked like home.

"They've just returned from their friend's funeral," she said, after a long moment: "Tavaris, Abraxas Malfoy, Edmund Lestrange, and Geoffrey Mulciber. When I say, 'indisposed,' what I mean is, 'too drunk for a testimony to count for anything.' I suppose it's all of them you'll be wishing to speak to, if you're here for Tavaris."

"Oh, yeah, that lot's on our list, too."

“Well, even if their friend has turned out to be … someone else, someone involved in something awful … he was still their friend, and they have a right to mourn him. I’ll tell them to visit the Ministry in the morning, when they’re sober. But for now, please, just —” she sniffled again, unable to help it, “— just leave.”

The one whom she suspected to be Gideon craned his neck to peer searchingly into the hall behind her; she followed his gaze to the vase of lilies. Finally, he said, “We’ll know to expect them tomorrow, then.”

“Let them know that if they fail to show up, we’ll be back to knock on each of their doors,” said the other, Fabian, “and we’ll no longer be taking ‘no’ for an answer.”

“Of course,” said Hermione. Theodore was crying in earnest now, but she gave up on her attempts to soothe him, once more seizing the door handle. “Enjoy the rest of your evening, Aurors Prewett. And give my regards to your mother, Barty.”

“I will,” said Barty, and then, giving her a meaningful look, he added, “and mine to your husband.”

Nodding her head, she began to close the door, forcing them all to step back whether they wanted to or not. Once it was shut, she turned the lock with a *click* they were sure to hear from the other side and moved to the window to watch them walk back towards the gates. There were several pairs of footsteps behind her, accompanied by the *thud* of one walking-stick and the crisp *tap* of another, but she did not tear her gaze from the window until Gideon, Fabian, and Barty had all Disapparated, their figures vanishing into the twilight.

The Dark Lord stood at the front of the group, his head tilted as he looked at her, and she could sense the many unanswerable questions and biting remarks dancing on the tip of his tongue, each of which would undoubtedly stay in her thoughts for months on end, keeping her awake at night, making her stomach churn, and gradually causing her mind to deteriorate; Tavaris, too, appeared curious, but he would say nothing for now, and instead stand very still and wait until the Dark Lord was done, until he had succeeded in shattering her, before coming forth to pretend that he could pick up the pieces; Geoffrey was being restrained by Abraxas and Edmund, practically foaming at the mouth, his wand drawn and his muscles tense with a desperate need for revenge — a need to make someone else hurt the way he was hurting — and it was highly probable that they had been restraining him from the second they had heard Gideon’s and Fabian’s voices; tired and upset, Theodore had reached the point of sobbing, his hands balled up into tiny fists that he hammered clumsily against her shoulder and chest to force her to acknowledge him; and —

Hermione could not do this.

“Dinky?” she called, and her voice cracked, her breaths coming too fast and too short. “*Dinky*!”

There was a *pop* as Dinky appeared. Without explanation, she wrangled Theodore, as he swung his fists and kicked his legs, into their arms. Then she turned on the spot and started past the stairs, down the hall.

Did secrets like this remain strictly within the Order, she wondered as she flung open the study door and marched inside, or had Gideon and Fabian shared it with their sister and her husband the last time they had visited the Burrow for dinner?

"Not even a little hiss?"

Hermione threw open the next door, which led out to the grounds behind the estate. The air was cool with the approach of dusk, refreshing, but still, she was gasping, choking on every breath she took.

"What do you think would happen if the Dark Lord thought his mist—?"

Had her family of the future known this rumour about the late Lady Nott, and simply kept it to themselves? Is this how they had remembered her? As the Dark Lord's mistress, whose son may or may not have been his rather than her husband's?

"Your son's father, perhaps?"

Thinking about it made her nauseous, the heat of bile rising through her stomach to where her heart was lodged in her throat as she stormed down the grassy decline past the treeline, half-stumbling through the trees and over their gnarled roots. Her eyes were wide open, yet she could see nothing save for the shapes and colours of her surroundings, all melded unevenly together to create what could have been a reflection in a shattered mirror.

"I'm very fond of you, did you know that?"

When Hermione reached the very bottom of the slope, she nearly crashed into the rusting wrought-iron gates. Blindly, she wrenched them open.

"I do not believe that she had any intention of harming young Theodore — rather, that she wished to test a theory."

Who else had heard this rumour? Who else thought her son's true surname should have been Riddle?

"Has Tavaris spoken to you yet about his getting on with a spare?"

If Tavaris were to decide that he wanted a spare, would everyone think the same of that child, too? Those children, if he so wished, who were not meant to be?

"One should ensure they have as many spares as possible, in my opinion."

She stopped, panting, at the centre of the cemetery.

"Why so sad, Lady Nott? It's only a little blood."

Those children whom she would be forced to carry, even whilst knowing with the utmost certainty that they would not live.

"Don't look so frightened. I'm not going to hurt you, darling."

Under the soft, pinkish glow of the setting sun, standing on the dead, yellow grass amongst hundreds of cracked and weathered tombstones, Hermione let herself scream.

A number of men listened to the sound from afar, yet not one of them managed to hear it.

Chapter End Notes

Regarding the flowers at the celebration for Draco: roses are the June flower, for Draco and Narcissa, white ones to signify purity, and ten of them together symbolises perfection; carnations are the January flower, for Lucius, again white to signify purity; and creepers are magical vines within Beedle the Bard's story The Fountain of Fair Fortune, and are tasked with choosing who's worthy enough to bathe in the Fountain by wrapping themselves around a person and dragging them through the garden.

As the Seventh Month Dies

Chapter Summary

> With the lights out, it's less dangerous
> Here we are now, entertain us
> — Smells Like Teen Spirit, Nirvana

Chapter Notes

> CW: spoiler for Endless Night by Agatha Christie, references to disordered eating, and content that may be triggering to anyone who has struggled or does struggle with self-harm.
>
> I have been sitting on this chapter for a long time, editing and re-editing, apprehensive about posting it. It's darker than I'd intended. It's what I've got, though, so here we are.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione did not bake a cake the day that Neville was born, nor did she bake one the day after, when Harry was. Neither of their births were reported in *The Daily Prophet*, so she should have had no way of knowing about them. Ron's birth had been different; he was not a child whose arrival the Dark Lord had spent months anticipating, and therefore, no one had paid much mind to it. For all they knew, that horrendously orange birthday cake could have been in honour of one of her supposedly deceased parents.

What Hermione did do, though, on the morning of the thirty-first of July, was teach Theodore the lyrics of *Happy Birthday*, reassured by the fact that he would not remember it.

"*Happy birthday to you … Happy birthday to you … Happy birthday, d*—" She broke off with a sigh, slumping back against the sage-green armchair in the nursery. "No, you can't eat those either, Theodore."

Theodore gave a garbled giggle and, miraculously, removed his toes from his mouth all on his own.

"Thank you."

With a grin, he rolled over onto his front, wiggled about a bit, and planted his face, mouth stretched wide open, in Crookshanks' fur. A second later, Theodore jolted back in alarm, unpleasantly surprised to find his mouth full of cat hair.

“You’re not a very good listener,” Hermione muttered. Tiredly, she helped him pick the tiny ginger hairs off his tongue. In the safety of her head, she continued, mouthing her words to pretend they were spoken aloud. *And, to think, you graduated second in our class. Constantly competing with Ernie and Sue Li, the way Ernie tells it.*

She let out a huff of breath and dropped her head back onto the seat of the armchair, stunned even now.

Ernie, who I met as a baby a few weeks ago.

It would never cease to be odd, meeting these tiny versions of her old schoolmates. So far, she had encountered Pansy Parkinson, Marcus Flint, Ernie Macmillan, Draco Malfoy, Millicent Bulstrode, Daphne Greengrass, Vincent Crabbe, Gregory Goyle, and Flora and Hestia Carrow (all at the celebration of Draco’s birth, of course): the offspring of the Sacred Twenty-Eight only; there were plenty more whom she doubted she would ever encounter in this time.

In fact, now that Hermione thought about it, it had been over two years since she had last been near any non-pure-blood besides the Dark Lord and Snape (and Theodore, obviously, but only Professor Dumbledore and herself knew that). That such a thing was even within the realm of possibility sent her reeling. To go years at a time without laying eyes on a single Muggle or Muggle-born?

It made her wonder if the same was and would be true in the cases of her old schoolmates. Could it be that his arrival at Hogwarts was the first time Theodore had ever encountered a Muggle-born? Might that very first Muggle-born have been herself?

Presently, Theodore was trying to eat the copy of the *Prophet* that she had discarded on the grey-carpeted floor beside them. Abandoning her thoughts, she straightened back up to remove the now damp pages from his mouth. He immediately dove for it again, this time to crumple it, or else possibly end its existence. She caught a glimpse of the headline: *MUGGLE-BORN CANDIDATE ALLEN ABERNATHY STABBED TO DEATH BY WIFE — AURORS SUSPECT IMPERIUS CURSE.*

“You know what, go ahead. Tear it up,” she said, and for a while, she was content to watch him attempt just that. Eventually, though, he decided that her slipper looked too appetising to resist, and they were back to where they had started. “For heaven’s sake, Theodore …”

While Hermione gently wrestled the toe of her fuzzy, blue slipper from him, feeling like she had a dog for a son, Crookshanks prowled towards the closed bathroom door, his shoulders dipped low and his ears perked high. Unease stilled her, and Theodore toppled backwards with her slipper, subsequently smacking himself in the face with it.

He laid there for a moment, blinking dumbly at the ceiling. Then, predictably, he burst into tears.

She rather felt like doing the same. To do so, however, was a privilege for which she currently lacked both the time and energy. Her vulnerability was expendable, and she had already allowed it to surface enough that month.

She picked him up and held him close, rubbing his back and pressing her lips to the top of his head.

“Oh, Theodore, my Theodore,” she murmured into his hair. “There’s no need to cry, my love. Everything’s going to be alright.” A glance at Crookshanks, however, made her wonder if that last statement was a lie; he remained on guard in a stoutly crouch by the bathroom door, apparently sensing some sort of danger lurking on the other side.

Hermione closed her eyes, willing time to stop for a minute, just one, so that she could have a break. It would never be entirely safe in this place, and living in constant fear had grown so very exhausting.

Pop.

“Yes, Dinky?” she said, without opening her eyes. She kept her face pressed against the top of Theodore’s head. He was steadily calming down, having been more startled than truly hurt.

“Master Tavaris is being at the Ministry still, Mistress,” Dinky said. They sounded nervous for some reason. “He tells Dinky he is not being home until almost dinnertime.”

“He expects today’s session to run long, I know. He’s got a few meetings this afternoon as well. He told me last night.”

“Yes, but — but, Mistress …” They moved silently closer, and lowered their mouth to hover beside her ear, dropping their voice to a whisper. “The Dark Lord is being in the next room.”

It was as though a bucket of ice water had been dumped on her; a shiver ran down her spine, making the fine hairs at the back of her neck stand up and goosebumps break out across her skin. Hermione lifted her head, opening her eyes.

Dinky watched her with an apprehensive expression.

“I minds Master Theodore now?” they asked.

“Yes,” she said heavily. “Thank you, Dinky.” She pressed a final kiss to Theodore’s forehead before returning him to the toy-ridden carpet, where he swiftly began chewing on the end of a light blue blanket covered in Snitches. “Do you have any idea what he’s doing here?” she added, getting to her feet.

“No, Mistress.” Dinky shook their head. “The Dark Lord is not telling Dinky.”

“Very well. Keep Theodore with you until I return. No matter the reason, don’t let him out of your sight.” Hermione hesitated, then added, hating it, “That’s an order.”

She turned away, unable to meet their gaze. Taking a deep breath, she encouraged Crookshanks to move aside, then slipped into the bathroom, shutting the door firmly behind her. Her hands began to shake as she stared at the next door, once more hesitating.

She had not seen the Dark Lord since the week prior, when she had dragged herself back from the cemetery to find him standing atop the tree-lined slope, watching her in silence. He had let her pass without acknowledging him then, but now he clearly wanted his questions answered.

Hermione was growing to loathe questions.

When she opened the door to her bedroom, she found the Dark Lord standing before her bedside table, evaluating her collection of framed photographs. Her heart missed a beat when his hand rose to brush against the one of the Potters on Christmas, behind which hid Regulus' letter to Sirius, but his hand soon drifted, thankfully, to Frank and Alice on their wedding day, and she could stop holding her breath.

"Get dressed," he said shortly. "We're going out."

She willed her voice to remain steady. "May I ask where?"

"You may," the Dark Lord allowed. "I also may choose not to answer." He looked up from the photographs. "Do understand, Lady Nott, it is far more entertaining when you are left in the dark."

Hermione suppressed a scoff and crossed the floor to her wardrobe to pick out her clothes for the day. His footsteps sounded from behind her, stopping just before reaching the door that let out into the corridor. She heard him sit down at her desk.

"I would advise against wearing sleeves."

She replaced the first dress she had chosen and pulled another off its hanger, this one white with a neckline of rose-coloured embroidery, fluttering short sleeves, and a gathered skirt that reached the tops of her knees. If she really was going to linger in this time, she decided right then that she would need to find more clothes for herself that had not been picked out by Narcissa.

The Dark Lord was now idly investigating the contents of her desk, in no hurry to leave. Speedily, Hermione snatched up a few undergarments and grabbed a pair of heels with buckles to keep them on her feet should he decide to reinforce her fear of falling to her death by flying, then marched herself into the ensuite.

Her hands continued to shake as she got ready, trying to be fast yet simultaneously dreading the moment she finished. It took over a minute for her to put her earrings on because she kept missing the pierced holes.

"No point in stalling," her reflection told her, sticking her nose up. "Although a little rouge would serve you well. You have the complexion of cheap parchment, my dear."

"As do you," retorted Hermione. But the mirror was right about there being no point in stalling. Besides, wherever the Dark Lord took her, it would put some much-needed distance between him and Theodore.

Back in the bedroom, the Dark Lord had moved on to perusing her bookshelf. The sound of the door opening did not draw his attention, for he remained with his back to her, perfectly at ease. He did not even have his wand out.

"You have quite a contrary collection here," he remarked, in a rather distant voice. "Charms, Transfiguration, Arithmancy, Ancient Runes … geography and law … a surplus of historical texts … Also, inexplicably, a copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages*."

He turned to face her, his eyes flitting to the stretch of wall to the right of the door, where there hung a vividly orange poster with *CHUDLEY CANNONS* emblazoned on it in massive, bold lettering.

"Funny. My reports contained no mention of your enthusiasm for the sport."

"What *did* your reports contain?" asked Hermione curiously.

The Dark Lord's lips twitched. "Oh, they were plentiful," he began. He moved calmly towards the door and prompted her to follow him out. "My informants were sure to pass on even the most minor of details. One never knows what might later be significant. You would know —"

She tensed —

"— being such an avid reader."

Hermione released her breath carefully. She kept her face expressionless, even as she descended the stairs at least five steps behind him.

"Like in a mystery, you mean," she said, "where the clues are kept deceitfully small, each one seemingly unimportant until you learn the bigger picture, and then you feel like a fool for not recognising their weight."

"Indeed." The Dark Lord brought them down to the grand front doors before continuing, pulling one open and holding it for her. His eyes were narrowed as she passed. "Agatha Christie was exceptionally talented in that regard."

She stared up at him from the stone steps.

"You shared a number of private meetings with our dear headmaster," he said. "From that detail alone, I can deduce that you should not be taken aback by my familiarity with her works."

Truthfully, Hermione was not. She had been stopped by the bemusing image of a young Tom Riddle reading a Muggle mystery novel by the light of the lampposts outside his bedroom window whilst he was meant to be sleeping. She wondered if he had dared to bring any of those novels to Hogwarts with him.

The Dark Lord joined her outside, letting the door fall shut, and they started down the gravel drive together.

"*Endless Night* was the last of her works that I lowered myself to read. I loathed every word of it."

"One would assume the mind of a killer would be a welcome perspective for you," said Hermione. "Or was he simply not sadistic enough?"

"I found him pathetic, what with how often he contradicted his own intellect by going on about matters so redundant as the fragility of his dear, *loving* wife."

"And after he killed her? Did you find him pathetic then?"

The Dark Lord drew his wand to open the gates; the rusted metal groaned with the effort. Once they were off the grounds and the gates had swung shut behind them with a reverberating *CLANG*, he held his arm out for her to take.

"Especially then," he said, and he Disapparated them soundlessly from the spot, reappearing several suffocating seconds later on a steep cobblestone road nestled between rolling hills of green.

Thank God, thought Hermione, gladly dropping her hand. Flying with the Dark Lord had become her least favourite mode of travel, and she had once flown over the streets of London on the back of a creature she could not even see.

The Dark Lord was quiet while she regained her bearings enough to peer about their location. Squinting past the sun in her eyes, she found a large, stately house sitting at the end of the road. Its exterior was made up of what appeared to be limestone, and it had white-paned windows with their curtains drawn shut, concealing what lay within. When she craned her neck for a better look, a great porch with marble pillars came into view, upon which sat cushioned benches and colourful antique pots. The surrounding yard looked as though it had once been groomed with incredible precision, but was now inching towards overgrown.

Although no recognition came to her, there was something vaguely familiar about the house. It overlooked a village that, rising to the tips of her toes, she managed to spot in the distance, and that, too, was familiar. She turned to the Dark Lord with a frown.

"Whose house is this?" she asked.

For some reason, he looked appeased by her question. Rather than answer it, he held out his arm again. Squashing her annoyance, she took it, and he dragged them through the twisting darkness of Apparation to a second location.

This one, Hermione recognised immediately, despite the distant, blurring shimmer in the air that spoke of the wards which enclosed the property.

The road was dirt, surrounded by thriving forestry and in close proximity to a stream whose water could be heard rushing in the distance. The house some fifty yards before them was far older than the first, built from grey stone that was now weathered with time and covered in climbing wisteria. A robin perched on the ledge of a wooden birdhouse that stood amidst the vibrant wildflowers hugging the stone steps of the veranda, bumblebees happily buzzing

about below, and smoke emitted from the stone chimney atop the mossy roofs, revealing that, in the case of this house, someone was definitely home.

Up on the terrace, growing steadily sunburnt as he dozed in an old rocking chair, was Algie Longbottom.

Thistle House, thought Hermione, rapidly filling with dread. This was the place where generations of the Longbottom family had lived and died, where Frank had grown up, then Neville, and where, in 2020, Augusta Longbottom and her sister-in-law, Enid, resided alone.

"What are we doing here?" asked Hermione, on a shaky exhale. "The ones you want are in hiding."

"Who knows?" said the Dark Lord, with a satisfied smirk. "Perhaps they might wander out to share the good news."

"They're too smart for that."

"That remains to be seen. Alas, I suspect you're right in this circumstance, and it is better to leave now before Algernon stirs." Once again, he held out his arm, adding amusedly, "Or worse, Augusta storms out armed with her handbag."

For the sight of their third location, Hermione was grateful. She decided against wondering why she felt more at ease at a Nott property than she did near that of a friend and led the way up to the gates herself.

Nottingham Hall was empty aside from Goppy, who appeared out of thin air to greet them at the doors. His already enormous eyes grew alarmingly larger when he saw Hermione.

"Has the study been prepared to my specifications?" the Dark Lord asked.

Goppy blinked, appearing to return to himself. He hastened to nod.

"Yes, Master's Lord," he said. "The study is indeed being p—prepared …" He trailed off, his eyes darting nervously to Hermione. "But — but surely it is not being for —?"

The Dark Lord strode away before he could finish.

Goppy gulped.

"*Please*, you must be forgiving Goppy, Mistress," he said, in a frantic whisper. "Goppy was n —n—not knowing —"

"Lady Nott."

He and Hermione both snapped their heads round to look down the hall at the Dark Lord, the former doing so with such swiftness and such suddenness that his neck made a rather concerning *cracking* noise.

"Come."

Hermione laid a hand on Goppy's shoulder. "It's all right, Goppy," she murmured. "Whatever it is, you're forgiven."

Judging by the way he flinched under her touch, he did not quite believe her. She smiled in the hope of reassuring him, wishing there was someone there who would do the same for her. Then she turned away and started after the Dark Lord.

At her movement, he began to ascend the grand staircase on the left side of the hall. Hermione took comfort in the fact that they were, at the very least, not headed for the cellar.

It was on the third floor, at the very end of the long, spacious hall, that they reached their destination. The panelled walls outside the doors to the lord's study were lined with gilded chairs that, together, created a sort of reception area. Unlike the lady's study, this one was designed for business.

She wondered if Tavaris ever held his meetings here, or if he had forfeited that birth right, too, to the Dark Lord.

Sunlight flooded in from the windows across from the study's entrance, their heavy drapes drawn back by golden rope; chiselled wood bookcases that stretched from the swamp-green carpet to the coffered ceiling filled the wall on the right, the space before which was occupied by a small seating area with black chesterfield chairs; on the opposite wall were a pair of glass-paned filing cabinets that stood just as tall on either side of a marble fireplace, above which hung a large, empty portrait; and there, in front of the fireplace, was the lord's desk, with a wingback chair behind it that faced two more chesterfields with seats so sunken that anyone who sat on them would be forever forced to look up.

The Dark Lord swept over to the desk, seating himself on the chair that centuries of Lord Notts had held as they waited, dutifully plotting, for the return of Slytherin's heir. Hermione supposed none of them would really mind the Dark Lord sitting there — perhaps it would even please them.

She did not have to be instructed on which seat was for her. The edge of the desk, when she sat, reached only as high as her collarbones. With great wariness, she studied the items on its surface: Goppy's so-called preparations.

At the Dark Lord's elbow was a gold stand that held three vials of dark red liquid; to his right, just by where his hand might rest, was a stubby glass jar of bluish, translucent substance. Lastly, laid out directly in front of her was a sheet of parchment and a red-feathered quill.

No ink.

Horrible understanding dawned on Hermione all too quickly; the vials held Blood-Replenishing Potion, the jar was filled with Murtlap Essence, and the quill was not Self-Inking.

"Of all things … why this?"

The Dark Lord extended one pale hand to draw a wooden stencil out from under the parchment. He placed it atop the sheet and took his wand out to attach it with what must have been a non-verbal Sticking Charm.

“You already know that I own you. Why should you be surprised that I want it to say so on your skin?”

Hermione looked down at the stencil. Misery and hopelessness sunk hand-in-hand within her, and she felt as though she may drown in their wake.

“You shall remain here until I am satisfied it will stick. So as not to have your task impeded by blood loss,” he carried on, “a dose of the Blood-Replenishing Potion will be given to you should you ever near the point of losing consciousness, or, of course … should you be unlucky enough to nick the wrong vein … The Murtlap Essence, on the other hand, shall only be awarded if you beg for it.” He tilted his head, his eyes gleaming, and added, “I’m curious to see if you will.”

To beg the Dark Lord for mercy was a low she never wished to reach.

“And if I refuse?” she asked needlessly.

“You’re still young; I don’t suppose conceiving another heir would be too troublesome.”

No further convincing was necessary.

And so, nodding her head, Hermione picked up the quill and began to trace the stencil’s design.

The pain commenced in the form of a prickling, almost an itch, but not on the back of her hand. She refused to look up and forged on without complaint. The pain sharpened after the first completion of the design, making her wince. Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes as she continued to the second.

There was a rustling as the Dark Lord retrieved more parchment from a drawer of the desk, followed by the scratching of a second quill. Still, she did not look up, nor did she let herself think; she just kept tracing.

A smooth curve here, a cutting flick there — round and round the design she went, watching the lines of the stencil gradually fill with blood. She could have sworn that she heard the scratching sound rising off her very skin. That was the real parchment, after all: her body; to be drawn on, folded, bent and torn, and if a mistake should be made, scrapped and tossed into the nearest bin.

At the conclusion of the eighteenth tracing, there was a rapping at the doors.

“Enter,” said the Dark Lord imperiously.

A second later, Hermione heard Goppy’s fretful voice.

“Mr Wormtail to see you now, Master’s Lord.”

She stilled.

“Excellent. Send him in.”

The doors closed with a hushed *click*, and then came soft footfalls on the carpet, cautiously nearing the desk.

“My Lord,” Peter greeted. With far less surety, he added, “Lady Nott.”

“Sit, Wormtail. I was not expecting you until later. I must say, your timing is exceptional.”

Peter shuffled closer to sit beside Hermione. She felt heat rise in her cheeks, his gaze hot on the side of her face. It was only Peter, she reminded herself, yet she had no desire for anyone to see her like this at all.

“Do you bring news?” prompted the Dark Lord.

“Yes. Yes, my Lord, I do,” said Peter. The leather of the chesterfield made a rubbery noise as he shifted, sitting forwards to place something on the desk. He swallowed loudly. “Neville Longbottom was born yesterday evening at the Longbottoms’ hideout. Al—Alice wrote his information on the back. Ten — no, nine — nine pounds, I think —”

“I can read.”

“Of course, yes, f—forgive me, my Lord, it wasn’t my intention to imply —”

The Dark Lord cut him off with a disparaging noise. “He certainly does not look like much, this … *Neville Longbottom* …”

He was looking at a photograph, Hermione realised; a photograph of baby Neville that Alice and Frank had, in all likelihood, sent to their friends out of pride, intending to share with them the wonderful life they had created together.

She was proved right a minute later when the photograph slid into her line of sight.

At the centre of the image was a pink-faced, beaming Alice, sat up in a bed of rumpled, white sheets laden with a floral quilt, and being held up on a never-ending loop for the camera to see, wrapped in a cream-coloured shawl like the one Theodore had worn when Hermione had first held him, dozed a round-cheeked infant with a halo of blond hair.

Hermione reached for the photograph, careful not to get any blood on it, and flipped it over to read the words on the back, each one printed with incredible precision.

Neville Frank Longbottom, born 18:13, 30 July 1980.

9 pounds, 11 ounces.

She exhaled slowly. *6:13,* she thought, with a strange sense of astonishment; *Neville was born at 6:13 p.m., while the sun was still shining.*

"A supposedly powerful, pure-blood heir for House Longbottom," she heard the Dark Lord say, almost to himself. There was a hint of something vaguely derogatory in his tone. "How … *proud* … they must be …"

To that, she said nothing; nor, blessedly, did Peter.

"And the other?"

Peter handed over what she guessed was a second photograph. This one, the Dark Lord studied for several silent minutes. When he finally spoke, his voice was soft, and carried with it tones of mingled wonder and bemusement.

"Harry James Potter … an unremarkable half-blood …"

Peter made a small sound that might have been one of relief, as though he thought those demeaning words meant it was Neville who would be chosen, rather than Harry.

Idiot.

The second photograph slid across the desk. This time, it was a polaroid, Muggle and unmoving. Hermione placed the first one gently in her lap before picking it up.

Lily was not pictured, nor was James; instead, this photograph was of Harry alone, swaddled in a sky-blue blanket covered in Golden Snitches. Already, he had a head of wild, jet-black hair. His eyes were wide open, the same bright green as his mother's, and he was staring at some point above him — blindly, although no one knew that yet.

The sole addition to the photograph was a hand that looked quite massive compared to Harry, and just below the knuckle of its index finger was a small tattoo of the waning gibbous: the phase of the moon that followed the full. The hand was clutching Harry close to worn, black fabric, and Hermione could just barely make out the faded, white triangle emblazoned on it, through which shot a thin rainbow, marking it as a Pink Floyd band t-shirt.

The polaroid wobbled in her grasp. She dropped her eyes to read the cramped script on the thick border below.

Harry James Potter, for whom we spent nine hours waiting to be born at the horrific, horribly horrid, unholy hour of four o'clock in the morning on 31 July 1980.

7 pounds, 13 ounces.

Sirius' handwriting rippled.

“There’s also …” Peter hesitated, and the Dark Lord must have made a signal of some sort, because this item went directly to Hermione. “Erm — here … my Lady.”

A weak sob slipped past her lips, and she clamped her hand over her mouth, now holding a crisp, white card in the same hand as the polaroid. On it were several smudges of blue paint: one small handprint, and one small footprint; five tiny fingers, and five tiny toes.

“They’re all copies of the originals,” said Peter uncomfortably. “So — if it pleases the Dark Lord, that is — they’re yours to keep.”

At last, Hermione looked up.

The Dark Lord held her gaze, his eyes narrowed. Slowly, he inclined his head.

Another sob warmed the palm of her hand. With a choking gasp, she silenced herself, clutching the items close to her chest, right over her heart. He tapped the stencil pointedly with one finger. Understanding, she tucked all three into the top of her dress for safekeeping.

Determinedly, she resumed the curved line of beaded, red ink at the top of the stencil, and let it bleed into a second. Her quill followed the entwining loops down to the sharp flicks at the bottom, which dug into her flesh like a pair of venomous fangs.

Another few minutes came and went before the Dark Lord resumed his commentary, the air thick with mounting tension, whole waves of it radiating off Peter’s fidgeting form like the rising fumes of a bubbling cauldron.

“Such unexceptional names,” he mused aloud. “*Neville Frank*, *Harry James* … And yet, one of them is apparently destined to be my downfall …”

“It’s absurd, my Lord,” Peter rushed to say, and he seemed to mean it, his voice one of sheer bafflement, despite being paired with an underlying tone of desperation. “No one, let alone a *child*, could ever defeat you. Anyone who thinks otherwise is only deluding themselves!”

“True,” said the Dark Lord, as though he were acknowledging a simple fact of life. “Nevertheless, one of these two must be dealt with, and soon. What other information do you have, Wormtail, that might assist me in this pursuit?”

“I … Well, I’ve told you before that James and Lily are hiding under the Fidelius Charm,” began Peter. “As for Frank and Alice … as far as I’m aware, no one has knowledge of their whereabouts, not even their parents. Their post goes through Frank’s mother — I’m told any and all messages get passed between them and Thistle House by one of the Longbottoms’ house-elves.”

“That is, for us, unfortunately wise of them, to isolate themselves to such a degree … knowing better than to place their trust in something so impermanent as *friends*, like the pitifully hope-ridden Potters have done …” The Dark Lord chuckled twistedly at his own musings.

Peter, too, chuckled, albeit a forced, humourless noise that trickled unevenly into nothingness. In an afterthought, he added tentatively, "Actually, my Lord, I believe I heard something about Dumbledore and Moody visiting Frank and Alice, once."

"You *believe* you heard, or you did?"

"I did. I only … well … I could be mistaken, is all. But, yes, I heard — or overheard, rather — Dumbledore and Moody discussing going over there, to help strengthen the warding or something."

"I see. If they were to have followed through with that plan, then we need only to capture Alastor Moody in order to obtain the Longbottoms' location."

"I suppose. But —"

"It is fortunate for us that he remains a patient at St Mungo's Hospital."

"Truly, my Lord. But I reckon he — I mean, I believe he would be rather tough to crack."

"We shall see," said the Dark Lord ominously. The scratching of his quill re-joined that of Hermione's. "Does either child have a pair of godparents who may also have knowledge of their parents' hideout? Godparents who might have visited in the aftermath of their births?"

"Yes. Sirius, my Lord. It's him who was named Harry's godfather. There was also talk — mainly from James — of making Lily's sister godmother. Lily, though, she shut it down the second he suggested it."

"I suppose she's not *that* big a fool, then."

No, Hermione thought grimly, *she's not.*

"In—indeed. They — erm — decided on Marlene McKinnon. But Sirius, he's first on the list. None of it's in their will yet, but they wrote down the names earlier this week. It goes Sirius, Marlene, Remus, and if none of them are … *available* … then … then Harry would go to me, my Lord."

A good thing that he hadn't.

"If that is so, then in preparation for the unlikely event that we prove unable to obtain the Potter boy," said the Dark Lord, "the names on that list shall have to be … crossed out. The boy will be easily accessible if placed in your care." He made a sound of amusement, adding, "If only Lily and James Potter were foolish enough to put *your* name on that list, Mione."

The very suggestion that they ever could be was horrifying.

Again, Hermione heard the Dark Lord's quill echo her own. Inanely, she wondered if he was writing himself a to-do list.

- *Kidnap Alastor Moody*

- *Locate the Longbottoms*
- *Incapacitate Harry Potter's godparents*
- *Kill the Potters*
- *Rule the world*
- *Have tea with Bella*

She pressed her lips together to suppress her questionable mirth, and instead found herself holding back a yawn. Her eyelids had grown abnormally heavy, her face repeatedly falling slack.

The side-effects of blood loss had begun to kick in. Hermione watched the carving wind round the faint blue lines of her veins and prayed that it would not dig deep enough to puncture the wrong one. Her heartbeat quickened with this same fear.

"I ask you now, Wormtail, to stir distrust among this little circle. I want them all to be second-guessing each other's motives, their intentions … I want every word spoken to be subjected to doubt.

"In the case of Sirius Black, build on what is true — use his recklessness against him. He is headstrong and impulsive … Those traits have the potential to be quite dangerous, don't you think? You might even use his surname against him; he is grieving, his father and brother are dead … Perhaps he wishes to reconnect with his remaining family members …

"Now, Lupin, I believe, will be the easiest to vilify. He is, and always will be, a beast. What if that should put them all at risk one day? Endanger the boy? He may even wish to reunite with his … *dear friend*, here. In fact …" The Dark Lord trailed off, presumably to add something to his list.

"Consider it done, my Lord," said Peter. "And I'll think of something for Marlene. Maybe she … er … Or her brother's wife, rather — maybe Aisling McKinnon misses having a twin! I could use that to create distrust for Marlene's whole family."

"A worthy idea. You will start at once."

Peter took the hint; the leather of his chair made another noise like rubber as he stood to bow.

"You've done well, Wormtail," said the Dark Lord. "Continue to do so, and you shall find yourself rewarded beyond measure."

"Th—thank you, my Lord," stammered Peter, sounding flustered.

"Return at nightfall. I shall be awaiting you in the gentlemen's parlour."

"Yes, my Lord. I will." Saying no more, Peter scampered out of the study, and judging by the lack of footfalls, he did so as a rat.

Oh, the irony.

Hermione drew the tip of her quill back to the top of the stencil for another round of tracing, feeling it dig into her skin along with the parchment. She hissed through her teeth.

The Dark Lord, too, returned to his work.

“No dramatics this time,” he remarked.

She had not the slightest idea what he was referring to. Her brain felt rather like it had filled with fog. As she traced, time became a concept for which she had no perception. The sunlight that still flooded the study was the only clue as to how long she had been there, and it was hardly a clue at all, as it had been roughly nine o’clock when she had left the Nott Estate.

As the sun lingered, the Dark Lord summoned Goppy in intervals that could have stretched anywhere from five minutes to five hours. The first time was to order that a pile of post be sent off with an owl called Odin, and the second was to request a drink, which was poured from a crystal decanter that Goppy left on the desk when he scurried away again, shooting Hermione a grievously apologetic glance.

The Dark Lord nursed his drink for a long while, or perhaps he did not, and there were refills that she simply failed to notice.

Sat there on that lordly chair, he sorted through papers, jotted notes, and printed further missives, flipped through copies of the *Prophet*, and snickered and sneered at their contents, and studied photographs concealed in envelopes with wax seals of a house crest that depicted a raven poised for flight, as he jumped from one potentially world-ending objective to another. Every so often, he swirled his tumbler, disturbing the rocks of ice; she focused on the sound, letting it fill her ears to better ignore her other senses.

Even in her ever-dwindling state of mind, his high spirits were impossible to miss.

It was a mere feeling, true, but it was one that Hermione felt deeply: the Dark Lord already knew precisely to whom the prophecy had alluded; the plans he now quietly constructed centred upon one child, and one child alone. The possibility of his failure likely never so much as crossed his mind. He would indeed fail, though, just not to the extent that she wished he would; Lily and James would still die, even if Harry would not.

But peace would succeed the pain, just as it had before.

And so, as the day waned and the sky steadily darkened, Hermione carved into herself anew, digging this hole she stood in deeper and deeper still. She would bleed for all eternity for the sake of the future she knew. It hardly mattered if she never got to experience that peace again herself, so long as those whom she loved did.

In the wake of the fallen dusk, a silver-haired wizard whom she did not recognise appeared in the portrait above the fireplace, poking his head out from behind his frame. He disappeared again before she could wonder at his identity.

The Dark Lord stood.

“You shall remain here until I return,” he told her. “By then, I expect you will be nearly done.”

Hermione nodded her head sluggishly. As he rounded the desk, she shot a glance at the vials of Blood-Replenishing Potion. Thus far, she had been given one, and that had been several hours ago, considering that she could no longer feel its effects.

“No,” he said, spotting her gaze, “I think you can last a little longer without … if you’re careful.”

She hoped so.

The Dark Lord swept gracefully out into the corridor, his nostrils flaring with ravenous anticipation. The *click* of the doors came twice, once when they shut, and a second time when they locked.

Hermione let the quill fall. Her whole body sagged as though it had just been released from some inescapable bind; she slumped back in the chair, flexing her right hand as she attempted to breathe through its cramping, inhaling short, unfulfilling huffs of air.

Her stomach seemed to be caving in on itself, woefully empty of any sustenance. It was no matter; she doubted that she would be able to keep anything down, anyway.

Perhaps, Hermione considered, it was merely anxiety-induced nausea that kept her thin, rather than any genetically-high metabolism; she never could eat when she was too tense or nervous, even before she had gone back in time. Often, she had forgotten to feed herself at all, too busy worrying about everything else. Her secretary, Ethel, had frequently been forced to place bags of takeaway atop the paperwork on her desk, so that she would remember food was something that every living thing required to live — and then Hermione would bring half of it to Harry, telling him the same thing as though the reminder only applied to him.

With her thumb, she circled the diamond on her left hand, smearing the blood that had trickled down to its silver band.

High metabolism, she thought to herself, scoffing. On more than one occasion, Ron had told her that she and Harry needed to schedule in time to eat. Stubborn to a fault, she had once replied, “I’ll eat three proper meals a day when I retire.”

Denial seemed to be one of her strong suits.

She rubbed her temple, grimacing at the pounding in her head. Her lips were so dry from dehydration that the slight stretch felt to have caused them to split; she licked them to check, and, sure enough, she tasted the metallic warmth of fresh blood.

She wondered what Ron would say if he could see her now. Would he tell her that it was not worth the pain, or would he tell her to keep going, that he would think no less of her for it?

“Keep on, mine dear lady.”

Hermione raised her head, blinking groggily.

The wizard in the portrait had returned. Wizened though he was, he still possessed the same cutting jaw, heavy brows, and bold cheekbones that Tavaris did, undoubtedly a Lord Nott of the past. He stood tall in the middle of the frame, but with his chin pointed down to peer at her fairly. His speech, as well as his ruffled collar, spoke of the time from whence he came.

“Better to finish now, lest thou be summoned back for moe,” he said. “This pain is primrose; what follows shan’t be so temporary.”

“There’s nothing … temporary … about this,” said Hermione, nearly panting with the effort it took to speak. She tried to breathe deeper, more fruitfully, but not nearly enough air managed to reach her lungs. “Your name, sir?” she added.

“I am Lord Cerdic Nott,” the man informed her proudly, “first of mine name. ‘Twere mine own heir whom did raiseth these walls and stretcheth these corridors.”

She had to think frustratingly hard about that.

“You’re the one who … the one who named Nottingham after himself, then.” At his nod, she continued bluntly. “Your arrogance? Astounding.”

“To hast sureness ‘i oneself and name is to hast confidence,” said Cerdic deeply. “The arrogant are liars at meetest, and entertaining fools at worst.”

I’m a liar, thought Hermione, with a vague sort of numbness. She eyed the stencil before her. *The court jester, too.*

The cramping in her hand had now faded. She stared a little longer, willing herself to retake the quill. Finally, she dragged the back of her hand under her eyes, wiping away the wetness, and plucked it up off the desk. She had to hoist her feet up onto the chair and sit on them to rest her elbows, one hand holding up her head whilst the other traced.

The entertainment had to entertain, did it not?

The screaming began as a distant, unidentifiable sound sometime later, when the sky outside was pitch-black and the windows reflected the interior of the study. It came in intervals at first, rising from floors upon floors below her, through the vast openness of the Great Hall and the wide, echoing stairwells, until finally creeping through the slim space beneath the study doors, and softening against the carpet.

Her head had dropped to rest by the small pool of blood, muffling her hearing in one ear. Hermione assumed that the other must have been ringing, and then she assumed that it was the sound of her heartbeat, spaced out as it was.

But her heartbeat was a quickening *thump* that pounded within both her chest and her head, whereas the sound she was picking up on was akin to the shrillness of a record repeatedly scratched.

She heaved her head upright, planting her chin on the desk. Her brows furrowing, Hermione listened.

Music?

Her eyes flicked up to the portrait, but Cerdic was gone. They flitted to the doors, a combination of fear and dread building like a ton of bricks to weigh heavily in her stomach.

The laughter came next, so high and strident that she nearly mistook it for the screams, yet the sounds were all so faint that she suspected her imagination was to blame. Perhaps an additional component of the quill was triggering a hallucination.

Moments later, however, the lock *clicked* open, and the doors parted to reveal the Dark Lord standing in the middle of the large frame, smiling darkly. She knew then that it was real.

"I thought for sure you would have taken another one of the vials in my absence," he said, striding into the study. "I see now that I was wrong."

He stopped beside her to rest his hand on the back of the chair and peer down at her work, smiling still. His other hand lifted to drag one fingertip slowly over the etching on her skin, his nail so dangerously close that she feared he might suddenly dig it in for no other reason than to draw more blood.

"Beautiful," he breathed against the back of her neck.

Hermione shivered.

"The human hand only contains so much blood, but the veins *here* …" Now, the Dark Lord did dig his nail in. "Yes. Beautiful."

She jolted upright and dropped the quill to clamp her hand over her arm, hard.

"Your gown for this year's ministerial gala shall have to be made wisely."

"The potion?" she asked hurriedly.

He removed one of the vials from the stand and yanked her head back by her hair to tip its contents down her throat. She squeezed her eyes shut to avoid looking at him.

"Did you know, this potion happens to have been brewed with your very own blood?" he asked rhetorically, as Hermione swallowed the sharp liquid down thickly, then swallowed a second time when it promptly rose back up. Within seconds, she could feel the life returning to her body, but what good was replenishment if it did not stop the bleeding?

As he returned the empty vial to its stand, she searched for a solution, no matter how temporary; in the end, she removed the buckle from one shoe to use as a tourniquet.

The method made the Dark Lord smirk.

"I have several vials of it myself," he added blithely, taking out his wand, with which he silently Conjured a cloak, "although I believe Tavaris has more in his own collection."

The fabric of the Conjured cloak sparkled like untouched snow on a sunny winter afternoon, so bright that she was left squinting. With another smooth wave, he had manipulated it to drape itself over her shoulders, the hood falling neatly over her head, presumably to conceal her face.

"Another outing?" asked Hermione weakly, unfolding herself to rise off the chair. Her legs were numb, bloodless from having been sat on for so many hours; she leaned against the edge of the desk, shutting her eyes for a second.

The world teetered around her.

"Not quite. I'd like for you to join me in witnessing tonight's celebration."

"Don't you think that's a tad bit presumptuous?"

The Dark Lord dipped his head to peer at her face.

"Do you?" he asked.

"It's certainly rather bold."

"Since when had you developed a distaste for boldness?"

Still clutching her arm despite the makeshift tourniquet, Hermione stepped around him pointedly. Chuckling, he allowed her to lead out into the corridor.

She took the stairs with painstaking slowness. It was a wonder that he did not lose his patience, waiting on her at the foot, but perhaps his satisfaction was too great for that. After all, it had been what he would likely deem a solidly good day. Everything, to his eyes, appeared to be going his way.

The sounds grew louder with each passing second of their descent; chaotic choruses punctured by jeering laughter, chords struck in perfect harmony to thunderous *BOOMS* and *THUDS*, and keys that matched every high note of a multitude of screams.

On the second-floor landing, Hermione was stopped in her tracks by a powdery, black fog that cloaked what lay beyond the next set of stairs. It brushed tauntingly against the bottom step, tiny particles that lingered on the outskirts like the drifting ashes of a great, billowing fire.

"Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder?"

"Elements of it," said the Dark Lord. Offering no further explanation, he continued past her, down into the darkness.

Bracing herself, Hermione followed.

The first step into the fog revealed that it did not, in fact, cloak everything, but rather, the location. It fizzled atop the furniture, clung to the walls, and crawled along the floors, making

it look as though she were traipsing through some otherworldly space; a dimension of pure blackness for as far as the eye could see.

The Dark Lord remained visible ahead of her, leading the way to what she knew from memory alone was the bannister which overlooked the Great Hall, but what had taken on the appearance of smoke rising waist-high off the floor. The Hall itself seemed to be the source of the fog, now a seemingly bottomless pit of sable.

At the centre of the abyss, a single man flailed in mid-air.

"GO ON AN' DO IT, THEN, IF YOU THINK IT'LL GET YOU YOUR ANSWERS!" he was bellowing. "BUT I'M WARNIN' YOU NOW, ALL YOU'LL GET IS A BLOODY MESS!"

From the roaring crowd below, a voice bellowed back, "WHO SAYS WE'RE OPPOSED TO THAT?"

Hermione's eyes grew wide with horror. Before she knew it, she was colliding with the bannister.

"*PUT — HIM — DOWN*!"

Several members of the crowd fell silent, lowering their wands — and some, their sloshing bottles of drink — to look up through the slits in their skull-like masks. The flailing man struggled to turn his head, his one leg swinging above him.

"*NOW*!" demanded Hermione.

Miraculously, the Dark Lord signalled for Moody to be lowered. He landed none too gently on the untraceable floor, but withstood the pain of the impact well enough to curse at the cloaked figures around him.

"My Lord?" one of them called up, inquiring. Hermione could not decide who the voice belonged to. Walden Macnair, perhaps? But the low, rumbling roughness of it could have also pointed to either of the Yaxleys.

"A dead man can tell no secrets!" replied the Dark Lord, in a booming voice. His lips stretched into a wide grin. "And whether or not he manages to hold his tongue in life, what joy would there be in allowing him to die quickly?"

Encouraged, the group closed in on Moody once more. Although she was unable to see their faces, Hermione was confident that Geoffrey Mulciber and Gaspar Avery were among them. She scanned for a walking-stick, but found only the one with the silver serpent's head.

"They work fast, don't they?" the Dark Lord commented to Hermione, as the figure whom she had identified as Abraxas came forth to kick at the bandaged stump that had once been Moody's left leg. "One short missive and I have Alastor Moody in my possession in a matter of hours."

"And the rest?" she asked, inhaling shakily. "What purpose does their presence serve?"

“Why, Lady Nott … those are the party favours.”

It made her feel quite stupid to have thought that she alone might possibly be entertainment enough; the Dark Lord was, and would die, insatiable, and this was a quality that he had clearly instilled amongst his followers.

Scattered about the never-ending fog below were a dozen nightmarish scenes brought to life, many of which, Hermione was certain, would become true nightmares soon enough.

On her left, in a corner that bled into nothingness, a bearded man in corduroy trousers was bound with rope to the shapeless shadow of a grand piano, while a masked figure in black robes repeatedly pretended to drop the fallboard on his head. As the bearded man begged, a dark-skinned woman with beautifully braided hair sang merrily on the bench which seemed to float, mindlessly playing a lively song under the influence of a second masked figure, who had their wand aimed at her neck.

Nearby, a cloaked couple danced jauntily to the tune.

Hermione shut her eyes just milliseconds before the fallboard was dropped for real. She flinched at the sound, overheard in scarring clarity despite the mindless woman’s ongoing song.

“Muggles?” she whispered, trembling.

“Most … but not all. Muggles are but one facet of the threat we face today. With the exception of Mudbloods, you see, their blood cannot, on its own, infiltrate our noble lineages; it must be aided by someone on the inside.”

She forced her eyes open, her knee to the clouded bannister to assure herself of its existence, and followed the Dark Lord’s gaze to the end of the Hall, or at least to the end of occupied space.

Hovering a few feet off the ground, for the sofas they lounged on had been swallowed by the fog, was a group drinking and making toasts, heads buried in a couple of their laps, as they all laughed uproariously at the scene between them.

There, a young woman in a torn, poppy-patterned sundress was attempting to curl in on herself, her seizing arms fighting to wrap protectively around her stomach, as another masked figure subjected her to what could only be the Cruciatus Curse.

There was something clogging Hermione’s throat. “Who is she — the woman wearing the poppies?” she struggled to ask.

“That would be Tillie Bones,” said the Dark Lord, “the wife of Edgar Bones, and the individual responsible for the recent contamination of their once pure bloodline.”

“Muggle-born,” she concluded, gritting her teeth.

“As a matter of fact, she is the niece of Professor Herbert Beery, the predecessor of Pomona Sprout who abandoned his post to teach at the Wizarding Academy of Dramatic Arts.” While

the combined screams hit a peak below them, he added, in a tone that hinted at the imparting of an inside joke, "He always was rather theatrically-inclined, in my opinion, particularly whilst potting Snargaluff pods."

A boot came swinging at Tillie Bones' abdomen as she continued to tense and spasm. Still, she refused to move her hands.

"Wizarding ancestry aside, she remains the daughter of … *an electrician* …" The Dark Lord made a derisive noise. "Look at her, trying to protect her internal organs. As if such Mugglish measures could possibly shield one from the power of a wand."

Hermione did not think that was what Tillie Bones was trying to do at all.

"Today was her first day returning to work following the birth of her second child. As you can observe, luck was not on her side this evening, for she happened to leave the Bard Theatre at the same time that Bellatrix grew weary of watching the performance."

Giddy cackling emerged from over the din. The figure standing between the sofas was dancing on the balls of their feet, dark ringlets of hair peeking out from beneath their hood.

The next second, the poppies on Tillie Bones' sundress were bathed in a glow of sickly-green light, and her arms flopped lifelessly back to the floor.

"Pity. I thought that would last longer."

Hermione stared without blinking, unable to move. The blockage in her throat was surely her heart, for she could not feel it in her chest anymore.

Edgar Bones and his family had not met their ends together, it turned out.

"My Lord?" came a deep, wavering voice from behind them. "Forgive me if I have … interrupted …"

"Only mildly. Our dear Lady and I are merely observing the many spectacles the night has to offer," said the Dark Lord lightly. "Although, I wonder … has it not been entertaining enough for yourself?"

"I assure you that is not the case. I have partaken, and with pleasure," said Snape. "There is just a — a small matter, if you will, that I'd wished to speak to you about, my Lord. In private," he added, after a beat.

"Your brethren cannot hear us over the sound of their own revelry. Speak now, Severus, or you risk wasting our time."

"Of course, my Lord. I would never wish to impose upon your … It is just that …" Snape's hesitation was loud. "I was only interested in hearing the specifics of — that is to say, now that you have chosen the child of the prophecy … what is your next step?"

"I should think that would be obvious. Was I not clear when I made my announcement earlier this evening?" asked the Dark Lord. He gave Snape an opportunity to answer, but Snape only

waited for him to go on. “It is to find the three Potters wherever it is they have hidden themselves … and kill them.”

Snape drew an unsteady breath.

“*All* of them, my Lord? Given your speech, I had assumed only the child …”

“It will be cleaner that way, would you not agree? To simply end the Potter bloodline in one fell swoop.”

“But Lily is not a Potter.”

“Oh, dear,” tutted the Dark Lord. “Have I been misinformed? Is that not her surname now?”

“It *is* —” Snape’s voice cracked, “— but that is all, it is a name only; she’s not a Potter by blood, she is —”

“A Mudblood,” finished the Dark Lord, in a cool voice. “Is that what you were going to say, Severus? That she is a Mudblood, and therefore, unguilty? Were you going to suggest that she should be left unharmed?”

“*Pardoned*. My Lord, she should be pardoned.” With every word he spoke, Snape came closer to spitting them. “The child has been — *born* — and now she can be detached from it, she can be removed from the home of that *blood traitor* and his unnatural *spawn*!”

Very slowly, Hermione turned away from the bone-chilling sight of Tillie Bones’ surrounded corpse.

Snape was disguised in the same hooded-robes and bone-white mask as the others, concealing his expression. His desperation was made clear, however, by the way he was leaning towards the Dark Lord, nearly staggering on the tips of his toes.

“My Lord, I promise you that she can be taken care of in other ways,” he said beseechingly. “*I* can take care of her. Do away with the child and its — its *unfit* father — and I will ensure that she poses no threat to you or your reign. *I swear it*!”

It would seem that Harry had not been entirely forthcoming in his recounting of Snape’s memories, because the only part of this with which Hermione was familiar was the plea for mercy on Lily’s behalf. She had not known he cared for Harry so little as to refer to him as an “it.”

“How?” asked the Dark Lord.

Snape visibly searched for an answer, and he found one in Hermione.

“If *she* can be subdued to this degree, so can Lily.”

The Dark Lord seemed to take a few seconds to digest this. Then, abruptly, he said, “Close your mouth, Mione. It is impolite to gape.”

Hermione ignored him and planted herself in front of Snape.

"You want Lily t—to become like *me*? To become *this*?" she demanded, brimming with incredulity. "For *you*?"

"It is not an unreasonable request," granted the Dark Lord, sounding thoughtful, "nor is it unprecedented. Would it not be nice, Mione, to have a friend again?"

She spun round, ready to snap, "No," or, "I don't want her here," but stopped herself at the last second. He had to offer Lily her life; he had to tell her to step aside, so that she could choose not to. Hermione could not risk influencing that, just like she could not have risked any attempts to prevent Bellatrix from raising her wand at Tillie Bones'.

"You're *pathetic*!" she told Snape, releasing her arm at last to shove him back by the shoulders. "And utterly delusional if you think a request like this constitutes love!"

"What would *you* know about *love*?" sneered Snape, quickly righting himself. "The only person you love is your son, to hell with the rest!"

"*Exactly*!"

"My Lord," he tried again, shifting out of reach when Hermione gave him another shove.

"There are other women. Purer women. You need not sully yourself with this one."

Snape went lower then, right down to his knees.

"I know this, my Lord, but still, *I beg you*. I do not and will not *ever* want another woman — she is *it*; she is all I want! I will never ask anything else of you for as long as I may live, I swear this to you! *Please*."

The Dark Lord's upper lip curled as he looked down at him. So did Hermione's.

"As I have said countless times before, we have found ourselves faced with a threat that must be dealt with *swiftly* and *mercilessly*," said the Dark Lord coldly. "The Potters *must* be eradicated should we continue to accomplish our goals. It is a simple fact … an uncomplicated solution to the problem at hand … yet you, who thinks himself so brilliant, seem to be experiencing some difficulty in comprehending it."

"There is no difficulty to speak of! I understand the threat in its entirety, I bore witness to the prophecy's foretelling myself! If you must kill the others, so be it! *I — don't — care*, we are better off without them! Just … just give Lily to me, my Lord. Have mercy on her … *please* … have mercy …"

"Are you not ashamed of yourself right now, Severus? Begging for the worthless life of a common Mudblood?"

"She is not worthless, my Lord," said Snape brokenly; "she is *everything*."

The Dark Lord considered him. His wand had wound up in his hand again at some point, and he rotated it in his grasp.

Back down on the ground floor, Moody had quit shouting; now, he was only screaming, an awful, gut-wrenching sound that seemed to tear itself from his throat. Hermione resisted the urge to look, instead glaring at Snape. She held tight to her arm again, wishing it was her wand.

"What say you, Mione?" said the Dark Lord finally. "Do you believe Lily Potter deserves to live?"

In this circumstance, the honest answer was not the correct one. Her voice, however, refused to speak the lie.

"It is not my place to say," she settled on.

He hummed, his attention drifting back to Snape.

"Should you go on serving me as well as you have thus far … should you do well to please me … I shall keep your request under consideration."

Snape gasped in relief.

"Th—thank you, my Lord!" he choked. "*Thank you*. I can—cannot put into words h—how *grateful* I am to —"

"You're being tiresome now, Severus," sighed the Dark Lord. "Go be pathetic someplace else."

Snape staggered to his feet, beginning to back away before he was even stood fully upright. Just before he turned away, he glanced at Hermione. She could sense the accusation burning through him: the question of, *Why was I the only one begging?*

That was not a question she could answer, though, lest she gave herself away. Very soon, he would come to understand that concept.

"But, Severus?"

Snape froze a few metres away, only his mask visible amidst the fine, powdery darkness that enveloped the landing.

"Do not allow my words to delude you," the Dark Lord warned. "In whichever ways you may manage to prove your worth in the coming months, it will not lessen the severity of the threat this boy poses … and when the time comes … remember that I promised you nothing."

A moment passed as his words sank in.

And then, in a voice that sounded half-dead, Snape told the Dark Lord the first lie of what would be many.

“When the time comes, I shall stand with you regardless of your decision. For even considering it, you are, and shall remain in my thoughts, a most merciful lord.”

With that, he vanished down the stairs. At the same time, a triumphant, “My Lord!” was cried below, in a voice easily placeable; the two of them shifted their gazes to a single broad figure standing over the screaming Moody, whose hands were now clutching his bloodied face.

Geoffrey held up his prize as if it were the Triwizard Cup.

“A token for House Avery, my Lord!” he declared.

It was the most literal display of *an eye for an eye* that Hermione had ever seen.

The Dark Lord gave a slam of a laugh. He leaned forwards with his hands atop the black-misted bannister.

“I see that a mere loss of limb was not nearly satisfying enough!” he said. “I tell you now, my faithful, you need only have patience! In time, I will grant you your vengeance in its fullest capacity!”

They were like animals, the way they flocked to the sound of his voice; a pack of predators who hid themselves from the light of day, but who lurked in the depth of night, waiting hungrily in the shadows for a bigger creature to make its move before skulking out to feast on the carcass it left behind.

“Someday, we shall see Alastor Moody dead. That day is not today.”

This is most definitely the day, Hermione thought darkly. *Just not the year.*

“But this does not mean your efforts tonight are without worth!” the Dark Lord went on, with increasing ferocity. “A grand general, they think him! An unshakeable force who stares fearlessly into the eyes of death! Those laughable fools shall all be disillusioned of this belief — their faith in him diminished, their hope stamped out — when he returns to them nothing but a beaten and broken soldier!”

“Mad,” she murmured, watching Moody attempt to crawl away only to be dragged back by the ankle. “When he returns to them mad.”

The Dark Lord’s hand landed on her shoulder, triggering a flinch, when he threw his head back with the force of his next laugh. Hermione ground her teeth together.

“I remind you, have patience!” he exclaimed. “In good time! In good time, in return for your faith, for your loyalty and your devotion, and in the name of your fallen comrade, I will grant you far more than these pieces, far more than his mind and his dignity! In time, I will grant you his head!” To the ever-strengthening jeers of the greedy pack, he added, “But first … *first*, my faithful … I will grant you the Potters’!”

It was sickening, how raucously they hooted and howled at these words; sickening, how their eagerness intensified when the Dark Lord went on to gloat over the glory that Harry Potter’s death would bring. They were savages, every one of them.

And Hermione felt more strongly than ever that, in time, with her own patience and for her own faith, for her own loyalty and her own devotion, she would grant herself their heads.

But for now, she merely watched the revel roar on.

The feelings that accompanied the tiny *thuds* of a walking-stick hitting the steps a short while later were akin to those triggered by the ringing of the bell at the end of a fifth-year Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson.

"May I go home now?"

"It's funny that you call it that," said the Dark Lord. "Yes, go patch yourself up, Lady Nott. You have provided enough of yourself today; I want there to be something leftover for next time."

Hermione took one last look — at the man in the corduroy trousers, wedged inside the unseeable piano, at the woman with braided hair, who had finally stopped singing, at Tillie Bones', her poppy-wearing corpse dancing sinisterly in the air, at Moody, clawing blindly at his own face — and then she parted with the bannister, and walked away.

Halted perhaps about halfway up the flight of stairs, Tavaris was a still thing in the darkness, gazing up at her through the same mask worn by all the rest.

"We're leaving," she told him, without breaking stride. She had to let go of herself to hold tightly to the railing, feeling each invisible step out as she took them. By the time Tavaris started moving again, she was already nearly at the spot where the grand front doors were hidden beneath a thick coat of coal-like smog. She did not wait with the half-dozen masked faces watching her from the Hall's entrance on her left, but threw open the doors, and stormed out into the night.

It was jarring, to return to a world within sight. Hermione veered right into the stone exterior wall, and for a breath, she leaned against it for support. The combined light of the moon and stars was almost blinding compared to the darkness she had fled, the muted colours of the grass and cobblestone under a near-midnight sky bearing an unnatural vibrance.

Beyond the hill and far off into the sweeping distance, she could spot the specks of yellow light from the lampposts of Nottingham. She supposed that was the place from which the dozens of Muggles had been taken, stolen from their beds or from their journeys home from work. Perhaps one or two had been out walking their dogs — dogs, who, if they were lucky, now roamed the streets alone, their leashes loose and dragging behind them, as they howled for someone who would never return.

The doors banged open behind her. Tavaris' heavy breathing rose in volume the closer he got to where she now stood, halfway down one curve of the rounded drive, next to a stone fountain filled with muddy water.

"Show me your hands."

Hermione ignored him. “Cerdic Nott,” she said. “You have a portrait of him back at the Nott Estate. Don’t you?”

“Don’t be difficult, Mione. Not tonight. Not after today. The blood has *dripped* down your cloak, for fuck’s sake! Did you even notice? Did you even realise? It was *smeared* on the railings. Your hands are *covered* —”

Hermione whirled round, seething.

“And what about yours? Whose blood is on *your* hands, Tavaris?” she demanded. “Moody’s? Tillie Bones’s? How about the man still stuck in the *fucking piano*! Because mine are clean for all but my own!”

Tavaris jaw was clenched, his nostrils flaring as he fumed. In one bloodied hand, he held his mask, and in the other, his red-stained walking-stick.

“A Blood Quill. That is all I was informed of when I returned from the Ministry, before I received the summons,” he said in a low, gravelly voice. “Goppy was too busy organising all this to be questioned, and I hadn’t the time to come see you for myself. Do not speak to me as if I am your enemy when what I seek is to help you.” He gestured to her with his mask. “Now, show me your hands.”

“Oh, it’s not on my hands,” said Hermione. “This was a special quill. Blood spills far more easily from where this one cuts.”

With jerky movements, she pulled back her hood, shrugged off the stained, white cloak, balled it up, and threw it at his feet.

“Go ahead. Look,” she said, and she thrust her arm out, pale in the glow of the waning gibbous. “Now we match.”

Carved into the previously smooth, beautifully unmarred skin of her left forearm, in the same spot where there had once been the word, *MUDBLOOD*, was the bleeding image of a skull with a hissing, serpent tongue.

For a long moment, Tavaris stared at it, and said nothing, his expression reverting to that frustratingly blank default.

“This is what *I* did today,” she went on, through gritted teeth. Hot tears of anger sprang up at the corners of her eyes. “While *you* were off playing nice at the Ministry and shaking hands with people whose loved ones you’ve helped lead to their deaths, while *you* were in there *celebrating* with your repulsive friends the death of a boy who is mere *hours* old, *I* was carving myself up so that *our* boy would live to see another day!”

He looked up sharply.

“Yes. That’s what *I* did today.”

“Theodore,” said Tavaris, swallowing loudly. “Theodore was threatened?”

“Don’t be stupid,” spat Hermione. “If nothing else, today should have proven the Dark Lord is not above killing children. Even yours. ‘You’re still young,’ he told me; ‘conceiving another heir would not be too troublesome,’ he said.”

The colour drained from Tavaris’ face. At that moment, he had never looked more terrified.

“You did everything you were told?” he asked, in an urgent whisper, taking a lunging step closer, over the rumpled cloak. “You gave him no reason to make good on that threat, right? Theodore will remain safe? He’ll be alright?”

“Safe, yes. Alright? I certainly hope so.”

Feverishly, she ran her hands through her hair, beginning to pace shortly up and down the cobblestone in a rather wobbly fashion, heels twisting, the missing buckle leaving her ankles and toes clacking. She could feel the photographs and cardstock chafing and sliding against the left side of her chest, the skin there becoming slick with sweat. Had she had anything in her stomach besides Blood-Replenishing Potion, she was sure it would have come back up by now.

“That’s all you care about, isn’t it?” she said thickly, trying to catch her breath. “Your own child; a child who shares your blood. Well … I’m glad.” She nodded firmly to herself. “I’m glad you care about him. He’ll need you to. But I don’t … Why can’t you …” She trailed off, halting, too light-headed to go on.

“Why can’t I *what*, Mione?”

“You’re so scared,” she breathed. “I can see it plainly on your face, how afraid you are that this — this *monstrosity* you signed up for might get your son killed. You should be, of course, but —”

“This is not an argument to be had whilst you possess so little sense,” said Tavaris dismissively.

“*But*,” repeated Hermione furiously, “you have that fear, and yet —”

“It has been a trying day for you, darling, let us go home, let us leave like you said —”

He tried to grab her arm with the hand still holding his mask, but she yanked it out of reach —

“And *yet*, you were in there, cheering for the killing of somebody else’s!”

Tavaris made an impatient noise, hitting the ground with his walking-stick.

“It is the way things must go! The boy *must* die! How are you failing to understand —?”

“I’m not failing to understand anything!” yelled Hermione, her eyes brimming with tears. She jabbed a finger at her chest. “*I* understand! I understand that his blanket has Snitches on it! That it’s blue — a sky-blue — and it has Snitches on it! Does that sound at all familiar to you?”

“You’re talking in circles now. There is no *purpose* in caring about this child, Mione! There is nothing to be gained from —!”

She cut him off again. “It should. Theodore received the same one from the Crouches.”

Tavaris looked up at the sky as though praying for patience. His jaw remained tight, his dwindling restraint obvious.

“He has green eyes, you know. Green eyes like his mother — a vibrant green, almost emerald. And his hair — he has his father’s hair — black and sticking up in every direction and — and, *God*, *it’s a mess*!”

Hermione swayed in place, clutching a stitch in her side, but refused to sit — to stand down. Tavaris was shaking his head, dismissive still. It only served to infuriate her further.

“And his *name* is *Harry*!” she snapped. “Not ‘the boy,’ or ‘the child,’ and especially not ‘it.’ *Harry James Potter*. Do you understand now? Do you?”

“Understand what?” Tavaris snapped back, prowling even closer. “That you don’t want him to die? *I do*! That you’re upset? That you wish things were different? I understand that as well!”

“Have you any idea how many mothers — how many *parents* — have tried to encourage a friendship between their children and Theodore?” asked Hermione breathlessly, shrinking the gap between them a little more. “How many have shoved their children into my arms, have all but begged me to care about them? Narcissa *did* beg!”

“And I *understand* that. I was there, was I not, watching them trip over themselves to earn your favour? After *two years* of disparaging remarks and of dishonouring your name with their petty gossip, all they seem to want now is to prostrate themselves at the feet of their *merciful — fucking — lady*!” He gestured angrily to himself with his mask, causing her to jerk her head back with a flinch. “*I understand that*!”

“*My God*,” Hermione moaned, feeling frustrated to the point of hysterics. “That is not the bloody point, Tavaris!”

“THEN TELL ME THE FUCKING POINT!”

“The *point* is that everyone here is terrified for their children! *Terrified* that they might someday become collateral damage in the eyes of their master! So they’ve been trying to get *me* to care, to have *me* keep their children safe! But *still*,” she cried, “they have no empathy nor even sympathy for parents no different from themselves — for a child who is *no different* from their own!”

“No different?” Tavaris scoffed, raising his eyebrows. “He is the half-blood spawn of a blood traitor and a Mudblood! He is a prime example of what it looks like to have twenty-five generations of untainted blood thrown to the dirt!”

“*He is seven pounds and thirteen ounces*!” screeched Hermione, her hands balled into fists at her sides, her arms straining with the desire to swing them. “*And he’s got all ten fingers and all ten toes*! *And NOBODY CARES*!”

“Do you expect me to apologise?” His laugh was a punched force, abrupt and half-mad. “Fuck — you know what, if that is what you need to hear, if that is what will make you shut up so we can finally leave, then fine! I’m sorry!”

Tavaris took the final step, putting them front-to-front, her nose at his heaving chest. When she dared look up into his eyes, she found them as bottomless as the blackened Hall.

“I am *sorry* that you are upset,” he said, “and I am *sorry* that it *changes nothing*.”

Hermione sneered at him.

For now.

Chapter End Notes

Origin of the owl’s name: Odin (also known as Wodan, Woden or Wotan) is one of the principal gods in Norse mythology. His earliest identified role was a god of war, although he was also associated with runes and a god of poets. He was a tall, old man with a flowing beard and one eye (the other he traded for wisdom), and was often depicted wearing a cloak and a wide-brimmed hat and carrying a spear.

Although Tillie Bones is an OC, Prof. Herbert Beery (Pomona Sprout’s predecessor) is entirely canon, and his story was too funny to me not to add. Please take a moment to imagine a bloke who ran off to join the theatre teaching Tom Riddle, Bellatrix Lestrange, Minerva McGonagall…

Lastly, CuscusJones made some BEAUTIFUL AI-generated art for this fic, so you should definitely take a peek.

The Yule Gala

Chapter Summary

> Playin' all night games, every day's the same
> Roll out the red carpet for the walk of shame
> Nothin' to lose but a lot to gain
> Fame, yeah, you know her name
> Royalty, let her reign
> — Royalty, Down With Webster

Chapter Notes

> CW: a discussion involving homophobia, sexism, and women hating on other women, and a cliffhanger that will make you really, really dislike how long the wait between chapters is.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At the stroke of midnight on that terrible day, July became August.

Upon their return to the Nott Estate, Tavaris bandaged Hermione's arm with gauze that he first let soak in Murtlap Essence, the white wrappings soothing, healing, and, best of all, concealing. Only once scrubbed clean of blood and bundled in unstained pyjamas and dressing gowns did either of them check on Theodore; they hovered on opposite sides of his bassinet (which was steadily growing too small for him) and waited with bated breath for his chest to rise and fall in an even pattern. Theodore slept on in blissful unawareness.

"The Dark Lord cannot *ever* be given reason to harm him. Not ever," Tavaris warned Hermione in a whisper, his voice trembling. With a gravity that felt to weigh heavily on her lungs, he added, "It would mean the end of us."

Something, she sensed, was going unsaid. But she had been run ragged, and she was too drained to ask.

Released from his task of minding Theodore, Dinky spent the early hours of lingering dark tossing away every article of clothing in Hermione's wardrobe that was without sleeves, then dug up frames for her new keepsakes to display them on the uncluttered table on the left side of her bed. Throughout this, Hermione and Tavaris did not leave the nursery, sat up on an armchair each with books neither of them could concentrate on for long, and later, copies of the *Prophet* they scanned uselessly for early hints of the night's events.

The day, too, was sleepless.

On the second of August, Millicent Bagnold replaced Harold Minchum as Minister for Magic, after photographs taken by Edmund of Minchum and his very male bodyguard were sent to his wife, along with a suggestion that he should step down from the running, lest those photographs be released to the public.

The disappearances of Alastor Moody and Tillie Bones hit the papers on the third. Hermione learned that the latter's first name was really Matilda, although it seemed no one called her that. She also learned that her two children were named Reynold, aged five, and Sally, aged two, and that, as suspected, she and Edgar had indeed been expecting their third.

On the evening of the fourth, the *Prophet* printed the headline, *MLEP WIZARD FOUND DEAD OUTSIDE AZKABAN — JUST HOW SECURE IS IT?* The photographed Dark Mark wavered in the grey sky above the sea, the supposedly impenetrable stone fortress visible behind it. The Magical Law Enforcement Patrol wizard's body had been found on the shoreline that very morning, the article revealed, by the witch who had come to relieve him from his shift stationed at the docks. It was shocking to see such a story in print; one would assume the Ministry would want a death like this covered up. Clearly, someone else was controlling the *Prophet* now.

It was on the fifth, while Tavaris was away on business and Hermione was hunched over a clothing catalogue in the lady's parlour, that Theodore crawled for the very first time. His motivation to do so had sparked by means of an apparently insatiable desire to bite Dinky's ankle. In light of his new top-incisors, it probably hurt quite a bit.

By the sixth, it was announced that Moody had been found — or, more accurately, that he had been set free. According to the information released, he had refused to go to St Mungo's to be healed, triggering pages more that were filled with doubt over the hospital's ability to keep its patients safe. Moody was described to have appeared, *incredibly shaken, with his remaining eye flitting about in paranoia.* When questioned on his abduction, he had told reporters, "*We were kept in a bottomless pit, the lot of us. For days, everything was black. Couldn't see a thing save for their masks and … yeah, their masks. You-Know-Who showed his ugly mug, though, of course. Haven't a clue why he thought* me *so special, but no one else did make it out of that pit.*" Thanks to him, the Bones children were able to stop waiting by the door for their mother to come home.

Finally, on the seventh of the month, in the drizzling ten o'clock haze between rainstorms, Hermione was paid a visit by Snape.

He found her at the white-clothed table in the conservatory, where she was introducing a thankfully delighted Theodore to pumpkin paste, hardly able to touch her own breakfast apart from the tea. Crookshanks, of course, was curled around Billy Stubbs' pot, although his eyes were fixed on Snape.

Never before had Hermione seen him look so out of place, his discomfort so overt. It was as though he stood there, hovering at the glass-paned doors, to serve the purpose of another rather than by any choice of his own.

At once, she understood.

“That was quick,” she remarked.

Snape frowned at her.

“I have a question for you,” he started, after a second.

“Several, I’m sure. But you may ask this one.”

Hesitating, Snape glanced behind himself, verifying that they were alone; a Muffling Charm had undoubtedly been cast prior to his entrance. Looking back, he searched her face, unsure.

At last, he asked her, “Does it remain on course?”

He did not appear to understand his own question, which was unsurprising, really, considering that it was not truly his own to begin with.

It was Professor Dumbledore’s.

Hermione returned her gaze to Theodore. “There have been many things that left me doubting the answer to that question,” she said honestly. “Things that, in my negligence, I had no prior knowledge of. Not really, anyway. Not like I should have.”

“But?” prompted Snape.

It was with a deeply bitter smile that she looked up at him again.

“But, yes, Professor Snape. I’m afraid everything is going exactly as it’s meant to.”

And from there, life went on as unjustly as it had before.

Summer began to cool, the sun rising later and later, and by the nineteenth of August, a dozen albino peacocks were running rampant on the grounds of Malfoy Manor.

Abraxas, pleasantly inebriated, adored them.

“Happy birthday, old man,” Tavaris said, clapping him on the shoulder.

“If I could cast the Patronus Charm,” Abraxas began, and Tavaris required no end to this sentence before interrupting with, “Oh, undoubtedly.”

In the early hours of the following morning, as they stepped out of the Floo into the Nott Estate’s sitting room, Hermione and Tavaris stopped holding back their laughter. Although he did not understand, a recently awoken Theodore (who had been put to bed in Draco’s indecently opulent nursery) giggled right along with them, eager to share in their glee.

“Does he truly not realise he’s being made fun of?” Hermione snickered, incredulous.

“Edmund, Geoffrey, Elias, and I have been making peacock jokes in his presence for decades,” Tavaris told her with a drunken snort. “Abraxas has long since convinced himself

that he's in on it."

Their collective mirth rang throughout the large hall all the way upstairs.

Ten days later, on the evening of the twenty-ninth, they played host to the usual group in honour of Tavaris' fifty-third birthday. Although it was the first to be held without Elias (or any other Averys, who were all said to be travelling), their true grievance came in the form of Edmund's annual joke: "Do I spy a grey hair?" to which, this year, Tavaris replied, "A fair few, but plenty more if you look in the mirror."

"The darker the hair, the slower it greys," Desdemona told them all knowledgeably, as though she did not regularly use Colour Change Charms to disguise her own speckles of silver. Bellatrix proceeded to point out that Abraxas' hair was now more white than blond, earning her a reproving look from Narcissa.

The Dark Lord's company was, thankfully, only suffered for a half hour before he left with Bellatrix at his heel.

A few weeks after that, Hermione was suddenly turning twenty-one again. She blew out the candles on her birthday cake while wearing, as she had the first time, a dress that hid her scars, but that did not make anyone forget they were there.

Tavaris gifted her a camera with which to document Theodore's childhood. Considering what he and his cohort had gotten up to in the months prior, she was less than impressed by the accompanying promise to have Edmund teach her how to develop her own photographs.

"I think I can figure it out myself, thanks," Hermione said shortly.

"Nevertheless, the offer remains on the table should you change your mind," said Tavaris, digging back into his slice of cake. It was chocolate with buttercream frosting that had been coloured a vibrant shade of orange, because Dinky apparently thought that was her favourite colour now.

Theodore certainly liked it, judging by how happy he seemed to be about having it smeared all over his face. He had been given a small amount of frosting and warm, soggy bits of cake as a treat, and most of it had wound up either on him or on the floor surrounding his highchair, which had been placed between his parents in the formal dining room.

"I had intended to give you a different gift," Tavaris went on, after swallowing his bite. He took a sip of his dessert port to wash it down. "My first idea was a private music instructor, but seeing as you've developed a mild phobia of the piano —"

"I wonder why," said Hermione coolly.

"Yes, well …" He shook his head, discarding that line of conversation. "My second idea unfortunately fell through as well, once more on account of typical Gryffindor-like stubbornness."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

He waved his fork in vague explanation.

“No,” she said, setting down her own. “You said it, now explain it.”

Tavaris sighed. “Your —” he appeared to search for the right word, and seemed inexplicably disgruntled by it, “— *friend*, let’s call him — Lupin. It’s his fault that my plan fell through.”

Hermione’s heart stuttered.

“You’ve spoken to Remus?” she whispered.

“Not myself, no. Fenrir Greyback did.”

It had been many years since she had heard that name, yet it still brought goosebumps to her skin.

Tavaris eyed her closely as he continued. “He offered Lupin a place in his pack. If Lupin were to have taken it, and agreed to remove himself from Dumbledore’s Order, the Dark Lord was going to grant him immunity.”

Hermione stared at him in disbelief.

“For my birthday?”

“*Yes*, *darling*. For your birthday.”

“Remus would never agree to that,” she said resolutely. “He would never turn his back on his friends — especially not at the request of the monster who bit him.”

“Then you must know him well,” said Tavaris, a tinge of something sour in his voice, “because he didn’t. He very forcefully declined, actually. Even *after* Greyback informed him it was in honour of your birthday.”

Hermione was hit by a sudden and powerful rush of mortification. Her face grew hot, as though burning under the harsh beam of a spotlight.

“Greyback told him that?”

Tavaris’ eyes glinted knowingly. “Embarrassed, are you?” he said. “You didn’t want your friends to think that you were being treated with such deference here as to have the Dark Lord make demands for your birthday, did you? No, you would prefer it if they still thought you a prisoner.”

Hermione had no idea what she wanted them to think. What she was certain of, however, was that this had not truly been demanded for the sole purpose of her birthday; the Dark Lord had attempted a secondary way of eliminating Remus from Harry’s list of potential guardians. What method, she feared, would he try next?

“Well, you may very well be seeing one or two of them in a few months’ time,” Tavaris informed her, very matter-of-factly, “and that’s precisely the impression you must give them

when you do."

Hermione's mouth dropped open.

"I beg your pardon?"

"It has been far too long since you were last seen by many members of the public. First, you contracted Dragon Pox, then it was your pregnancy keeping you homebound, and now … now, we have run out of the excuses that we can afford to make. They need to see you for themselves, and see that you are, indeed, no prisoner."

"And how, exactly, will this be happening?" she asked fearfully.

Confirmation of the answer arrived in the post on a chilly Wednesday morning in early October, right after Hermione had received and politely declined an invitation to Pansy Parkinson's first birthday party.

UPCOMING YULE GALA HOST REVEALED

Yesterday morning, Minister for Magic Millicent Bagnold released all the highly-anticipated details to The Daily Prophet *regarding this year's ministerial Yule Gala, such as when and where it will be taking place, and just which celebrated individual or organisation will be hosting it.*

The Ministry of Magic's annual Yule Gala has had a wide variety of hosts since its originating in 1814, including but not limited to then-Chief Warlock Lord Armand Malfoy IV, the late Lord Cantankerus Nott III of the Wizengamot, author of Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy*, the late Fleamont Potter's widely-favoured* Sleakeazy's Hair Potion*,* Witch Weekly*, and even the* Prophet *itself. This year, the daunting task of hosting top ministerial staff and personnel, as well as today's most influential witches and wizards, has been taken up by the unanimously adored* Wizarding Wireless Network*. The gala is scheduled to take place on the evening of 20 December, the Saturday prior to Christmas Day, and will be held at the Merlin Hall of Fame.*

Unique to those of previous years, the chosen charity for the upcoming event is the Ministry's very own Auror Office.

"In light of recent events, our Aurors are in need of more support than ever," Bagnold said in her brief interview with the Prophet *yesterday. "Protecting the citizens of wizarding Britain is no easy task — nor is it a cheap one."*

Bagnold is, of course, referring to the ongoing war against He Who Must Not Be Named, the death toll of which has been rising with increasing speed over the last three years. Since the first recorded attack in 1970, his Death Eaters have claimed the lives of eleven Aurors, six of whom were reported to have been off-duty at the time of their deaths. Most recently, high-ranking Auror Alastor Moody was kidnapped and held prisoner for several days at an

unknown location, where he was tortured for undisclosed information. It is, therefore, no surprise that this year's gala will be held in their honour, and to their benefit.

It is up to the attendees, whose invitations are due to be sent out this Thursday evening, to donate whatever funds they can so our brave Aurors may continue the fight against He Who Must Not Be Named, risking their lives in the hope that, one day, we will get to live our own freely.

In short, Hermione was terrified.

The preparations commenced with an overwhelming swiftness, given that it was Narcissa who had been put in charge of them. Within a week of the invitations being sent out, she had two seamstresses from Twilfitt and Tattings arriving at Malfoy Manor to take their measurements.

"Twenty-seven," murmured Madam Twilfitt, a wizened witch with skin that seemed to hang off her bones, as she Summoned her measuring tape back from Narcissa's waist.

"You'll take it in a few," Narcissa told her curtly.

"With all due respect, Mrs Malfoy," said Madam Twilfitt, "the buttons may not do themselves up if I were to take it in anymore."

"You'll find a way."

She visibly held back a sigh.

"A rather more seventeenth-century look may be what you're looking for, Narcissa," Evangeline suggested from her spot on the sofa, lifting her gaze from the latest issue of *Witch Weekly*.

Their fittings were taking place in the Malfoys' drawing room, much to Hermione's overall displeasure, discomfort, and a whole host of other feelings that began with *dis*. Here, she had been carved into the first time; here, she had been offered to Greyback; here, she had been dragged out from under a collapsing chandelier by Ron; here, Dobby, who currently entertained Theodore and Draco on the imperial rug, had received a dagger to the chest; and here, she had been married for the second time, with Abraxas' wand digging into her spine.

And now, she was a guest, standing on a raised platform while a young witch with warm, taupe skin and pinned-up carob hair knelt at her feet to take her measurements. To say that she was on edge would be a massive understatement.

"A gown that aligns with the likes of those from the Regency era," Evangeline went on, flipping back a few pages. Locating what she had evidently been looking for, she held up the magazine, showing them a spread of women wearing rather broad-shouldered robes. "A puffy or well-defined shoulder seems to be all the rage among today's foremost designers."

As Hermione exhaled a slow, unsuccessfully steadying breath, she thought to herself distantly, *Shoulder pads already?*

"A higher waist is certainly doable," said Madam Twilfitt readily, as Narcissa stepped off her own platform to peer closer at the magazine. "To gather the fabric right below the bust, allow it to flow out from there, a straight skirt … I think that would give precisely the impression you're looking for."

Narcissa pursed her lips.

"Draw up a few examples," she concluded, after a moment of deliberation. "If the gown is to have a more historic silhouette, I require assurance that you can manage that whilst maintaining a somewhat modern look. I will not go out wearing something that could be found in the depths of one's attic."

"I would never expect a witch of your pedigree to do anything of the sort."

From there, they delved into a rather tediously in-depth discussion on fabrics and colour tones, during which Evangeline continuously shared with them her findings from *Witch Weekly*.

"And you, Mrs Nott?" the young seamstress asked, in a slight, rolling accent that Hermione did not recognise. She stood from the floor with grace, winding her measuring tape around her knuckles. "Your thoughts on what you wish for yourself?"

"Oh — er — nothing too dramatic, please. I'm not a fan of the terribly ostentatious."

"This is an uncommon request," said the seamstress, with a touch of humour, "but I respect this very much. Is that all you ask?"

"Erm …" Hermione struggled to find the right words, glancing anxiously about the room, at the chandelier and at Theodore beneath it. "I'd like to remember that it's still winter; I'd prefer not to be put in something that would leave me with chills all night."

"Very sensible. Again, uncommon." For that, Madam Twilfitt hissed a warning, "*Girl*," at her assistant, who promptly lowered her head. "The colours?" she added, in a softer voice, as she turned to retrieve a ring of swatches from the table behind her, where the others now sat.

Hermione left the platform to join her after another check-in glance at Theodore; he was babbling excitedly at Draco, who was chewing on Dobby's thumb and appeared utterly enraptured by whatever it was he thought Theodore was saying.

"A uniform green is very nice," said the seamstress, holding a square of muted fabric to Hermione's hand. "Very nice with your colouring. Maybe elements of silver, so jewellery like your ring?"

Hermione could not help but think that would be an incredibly Slytherin-esque look. Before she could politely express her opposition, however, her attention was drawn to the conversation taking place beside them.

"... Victoria McKinnon let herself become a — that she went public about her political leanings, to be clear. An awful shame. I am sure their sales suffered for it."

"Indisputably. The magazine would have been better off had she stuck to what she knows."

Madam Twilfitt leaned in, then back, then finally in again, to venture with caution, "Forgive me for my interruption, but I assume you're referring to *Witch Weekly*'s recent introduction of Muggle — I do hesitate to call it *fashion* but — oh, *attire*?"

The young seamstress stiffened.

"Disgraceful," tutted Evangeline, while Narcissa nodded along agreeably. "As editor-in-chief, Victoria has a responsibility to ensure and improve the magazine's success, and I cannot deny that she has done, but in *recent* years …" She trailed off with a significant look.

"I suspect it began about the same time she let her son run off to receive schooling in the Muggle world," said Narcissa. She wrinkled her nose. "They steered themselves into ruin with that one."

"Walter turned out fine for the most part, far less outspoken. Under the right guidance, I believe his marriage to Aisling could have been no cause for concern on the Traverses' end."

"I wouldn't be surprised if that were the case. Stefan was truly the first sign of trouble. If it weren't for his laziness, I'd think him a radical."

Evangeline gave a light laugh, clasping Narcissa's hand as though this was just so funny that she needed something to tether her to the earth. Eventually, she sighed, shaking her head.

"They set their daughter up for failure, I say, by outing themselves whilst she was still so young and impressionable. Why, she must have been barely more than a girl when Victoria had that first article published. The one about young Muggle women and their sudden disdain for undergarments, do you remember?"

"A feminine-um movement, did they call it?"

"Feminism," Hermione corrected, drawing their attention, "meaning the advocacy of women's rights on the basis of the equality of all genders. What you're talking about would have been a feminist movement. I suppose the bra-burnings of the nineteen-sixties?"

Evangeline, Narcissa, Madam Twilfitt, and even the assisting seamstress all gave her the same narrowed look.

"Yes," said Narcissa, after a beat. "Those."

"Completely asinine." With another significant look, Evangeline added scandalously, "I heard it was the *sapphists* who orchestrated it."

Hermione opened and closed her mouth several times, then repeated hotly, "*On the basis of the equality of all genders.* The movement was not anti-men; it was in defiance of the unfair expectations of social conformity forced upon women and upheld by the patriarchy."

“And therefore, anti-men,” said Narcissa, raising one thinly-arched eyebrow, seemingly bemused that Hermione could not grasp this concept. “To defy the patriarchy is to defy all men, and so the establishment itself.”

Evangeline nodded. “And from there, it is hardly difficult to deduce that the instigators would be the very same women who have allowed their resentment of men to lead them to seek out members of the same sex in order to achieve some form of self-fulfilment.”

Hermione faced them properly, holding up her hands. “OK, first of all, one’s sex and one’s gender are two entirely different things. Secondly, being a woman who is attracted to other women, whether that attraction be sexual —”

Both Narcissa and Evangeline had immediate objections to this line of conversation —

“We have *company*, Mione —”

“Let us forget this matter —”

“— or romantic,” Hermione continued heatedly, “has absolutely nothing to do with resenting men. And thirdly, do not use terms you have no ownership nor authority over to describe these women, particularly with such overt disdain. There are plenty more ways to identify them. She may be a lesbian, or bisexual, or pansexual, or perhaps simply queer, and possibly, on top of that, asexual, or demisexual, or aro—”

“*Mione*!” whispered Evangeline, looking appalled. “You mustn’t use such language in front of the children.”

Hermione scoffed, sincerely flummoxed by the absurdity that was the height of their denial and ignorance. She could already see now that this would go nowhere. She turned her back to them both, facing the seamstress, and said forcefully, “No to the silver; I wear gold.”

The seamstress’ lips lifted at one corner.

“Do you wish to look at the reds, Mrs Nott?”

“As a matter of fact, I do,” said Hermione. “And would you be so kind as to tell me your name? I assume it’s not *Girl*.”

The seamstress smiled for real now. “It is Carola, after my aunt. Carola Ebner.”

Not a wizarding surname, thought Hermione, and the outraged expression on Madam Twilfitt’s face confirmed it.

“A fine name for a fine witch. Now, Miss Ebner, let us see about those reds …”

Miss Ebner and Madam Twilfitt left roughly twenty minutes later, leaving behind duplicates of colour and fabric swatches to continue to consider, as well as an air of lingering frostiness. The doors had not fully shut behind them when the latter began hissing.

“You *stupid* girl —!”

“A Muggle-born, do you think?” Evangeline murmured to Narcissa. Neither would meet Hermione’s gaze.

“I certainly hope not,” said Narcissa, as she stirred a spoonful of sugar into the tea Lopsi had brought them. A tower of pastries and finger-sandwiches had also been served, although no one had yet touched it. “To bring one here, even, and perhaps most especially, in secret, would suggest that Madam Twilfitt has an audacity far greater than I have previously been led to believe, which would be disappointing, to say the least.”

“The British fashion industry is collapsing before our very eyes,” said Evangeline wistfully. “First *Witch Weekly*, and now Twilfitt and Tattings.” She released a mournful sigh. “How dreadful it is to live in these times.”

Hermione scoffed again, but chose not to say anything this time, ineffective as it would be.

Above her, the chandelier suddenly made a rusted *tweaking* noise. Her head shot up, her heart constricting painfully in her chest, but the chandelier hung steadily on, no true *tweak* of a loosening latch and no *clink* of rattling crystal. She looked away to shakily add sugar to her own tea, leaning forwards on the sofa to reach the tray on the coffee table.

Just then, the doors reopened.

Theodore looked over at Hermione, pointing to the newcomers with his whole hand. “Aff, see!” he announced, which she supposed was close enough.

At the entrance of the drawing room was Gaspar Avery, whose face she had not seen since prior to his father’s death, although she knew she had at least laid eyes on his mask. He appeared older now, his stance strangely solid.

She wondered if he had Moody’s eye displayed on a shelf.

“Good afternoon, ladies,” Gaspar said, bowing his head to each of them in turn with uncharacteristic politeness. “Pardon the intrusion, I was just on my way to meeting your husbands in the library. I have only stopped to see if my wife might be permitted to join you whilst I am occupied upstairs?”

Peeking out from over his shoulder was a second face, a far softer one that Hermione had not seen in even longer — not since the celebration of Draco’s birth, and prior to that, the evening of Orion Black’s murder. It was Bedelia Greengrass, the unlucky new Madam Avery. Judging by the fearful way she looked at them all, married life was not quite turning out the way she had hoped.

“Why, of course,” said Evangeline, with a practised smile. “We would be very glad for Madam Avery’s company.”

“Indeed,” said Narcissa, returning her teacup to its saucer. “It has been too long since we’ve had the pleasure. Her presence among the Ladies’ Tea Society has been missed sorely by all.”

“That is kind of you to say,” said Gaspar. Tentatively, he continued. “I admit she has been struggling to adjust to her new station. My mother has tried to act as a guide, of course, but … I had hoped one of *you* might be able to help Bedelia in that regard.”

For the first time in almost half an hour, Hermione, Evangeline, and Narcissa all looked at each other, sharing an unspoken understanding.

It seemed that Bedelia was struggling to come to terms with the fact that she was now the wife of a Death Eater, and it was grievous enough that even Gaspar was worried. It was no wonder, then, that they had not attended Tavaris’ birthday dinner, where she would have been subjected to the Dark Lord’s presence.

With a tight-lipped smile, Hermione patted the cushion beside her.

“Come sit, Bedelia.”

Bedelia wavered. Gaspar bent to whisper something in her ear, and whatever he said seemed to prompt her forward, slowly and stiffly coming to take the spot at Hermione’s side. Evangeline poured a fourth cup of tea for her.

“Thank you for your kindness, Lady N—”

“Oh, drop it, would you?” snapped Hermione, cutting Gaspar off. “I deal with enough sycophants as it is. I’d much prefer it if you continued being the pain that you are.”

Bedelia stared at her with wide eyes.

“As you wish, my dear Lady,” simpered Gaspar, bowing once more, and this time it was all splendidly mocking. With a rude hand gesture that startled his new wife even further, he departed for the library.

The four women settled back in with their tea and bitterness.

What followed was an epically loud silence, made so by the unsaid words mingling in the air, a combination of the ones they wished to voice and the ones they thought they ought to, and prolonged by the battle which raged between them.

Do I ask? one woman thought, while three more wondered, *Do I say it?*

At last, Evangeline spoke, yet she said nothing.

“We do not speak of it. It is better that way.”

Bedelia nodded apprehensively, still just as visibly tense. She licked her lips, parted them, then lost her courage, lapsing deeper into an uncomfortable silence.

“Safer,” Narcissa added, glancing at Draco.

“They’re right,” said Hermione, after a moment. “About *this*, anyway.” She paused to give Narcissa and Evangeline each a cold glare. “Silence will keep you out of trouble, but …

selective silence. Do you understand?"

Bedelia must have, because she then asked, "How do I differentiate between whom and whom not to speak to?"

"Not those loyal to your new family. They are under no obligation to extend that same loyalty to you, especially over those to whom they already have."

Do not trust the Avery house-elves.

She nodded again, shooting a nervous look at Dobby, who continued to entertain Theodore and Draco on the rug. He was listening, even if he pretended otherwise; his anxious teetering was sign enough. Once again, Hermione shot a glance at the chandelier, sparkling ever so innocently in the light of the windows.

Drawing her wand, Narcissa Spelled the doors shut with scarcely a sound. Stowing it away, she said, "To many of your friends, close as they may be, blood takes precedence over anything else. Their loyalty lies with their own families, and therefore, with those to whom their families have given theirs."

The Parkinsons are loyal to the Dark Lord. Tell your best friend nothing.

"Oh," said Bedelia, in a small voice. The dots connected themselves plainly on her face, and she looked crestfallen by their conclusion. "All right."

"You will see only if you look," said Hermione carefully, "and if you look, you will know."

Do not make yourself a viable witness if you don't have to.

"I'm afraid I've never been the best at lying, not to those who know me well. Is that, then … is that something you think I'll have to —?"

"Improve," said Narcissa shortly.

You won't have a choice.

There, the moment of frankness ended, for Draco had begun to wail, apparently distressed by his inability to follow Theodore as he crawled away. At that moment, Hermione was as uninterested in drinking tea as she was in staying in that room, and she did not wait to collect him; she left with Theodore in her arms, giving the Malfoy women a final look of disdain as she did.

The next several times that Gaspar visited the Nott Estate, he brought Bedelia with him, leaving her in Hermione's care while he disappeared with Tavaris and, most often, some combination of Angus, Evan, Rabastan, and Carden Travers, too, the latter of whom had begun appearing there with increasing frequency. Snape was there far less, solely on the weekends and usually alone, for he was the only one who had chosen to continue a study of potion-making, even now that he had completed his mastery and had begun teaching at Hogwarts.

He passed no further messages to Hermione, nor did he ask any questions that required a closed door. He did, however, give her speculative looks whenever they crossed paths, leading her to believe that Professor Dumbledore had still told him nothing. His curiosity must have been killing him.

Of the bunch, Barty visited the least. His father kept him late at the Ministry with various paper-pushing tasks and the tasks his father knew nothing about kept him there even later. It was harder for Barty than the others to slip away without suspicion. When managed, his visits almost always coincided with one of Evan's, and typically meant two occupied guest rooms, but only one bed of rumpled sheets. Hermione hoped dearly that Dinky was keeping their mouth shut about what discoveries the laundry brought.

Lucius, from what she gathered, was typically instructed at Nottingham Hall, either to make use of the elusive duelling room or to hide what he and Tavaris were doing, and who they were doing it to. He was colder now, though, and had been becoming so for many months. Oddly, or perhaps not oddly at all, Narcissa was growing colder with him. Now, her smiles were twice more often performed, her rare giggles softened by sealed lips, and her frowns were simply a lowered brow. Now, it was Bedelia who could not make sense of that which had laid so long beyond the glass walls of the rose-coloured castle she had been raised in.

Hermione could have been more open with her, presenting herself as someone to whom Bedelia could speak without consequence. She considered it, certainly, but ultimately chose to maintain her silence. As had been her advice, Hermione would not make Bedelia any more of a witness than she already would be.

*

"Perfect," Tavaris murmured with a slow smile as Hermione stepped back into the second-floor drawing room, now in her newly-fashioned gown of red and gold. "You do your old house proud in that, darling."

She studied herself in the floor-length mirror Conjured for her by Madam Twilfitt, who had, this time, come alone. Although Hermione's preference of colour had most definitely been taken into account, her other requests had been completely disregarded.

The tight, shaping bodice of the gown not only had no sleeves attached to it, but no straps at all. The scarlet silk bled from the top of her chest and down her waist, trickling loosely like a stream of water to the tops of her feet, on which she wore a pair of pointed, blood-red heels with golden buckles on their straps. To replace the sleeves were a pair of gloves that stretched to the crook of her arms and were made up of golden-laced flowers with a layer of silk beneath them which blended into her skin as if it were not there at all.

The gown with its gloves concealed everything, without seeming to conceal anything at all. With so much skin on display, no one would suspect it might hide what she feared a great many of them would be looking for.

Madam Twilfitt came forth to check that everything was to the right fit. Once she had verified that nothing needed adjustment (and very transparently offered her services for any and all future events), and Tavaris had confirmed that payment would be made by owl before the end

of the day, Dinky escorted her out the door, leaving Hermione, Tavaris, and Theodore to themselves.

As the door fell shut, Tavaris said, “I put in a few requests myself, you know.”

That would explain why her own had gone ignored.

He absently adjusted Theodore, who was sitting on his knee and investigating the foreign texture of the white-gold signet ring on his father’s littlest finger.

“It’s funny,” said Tavaris, “because when I did, I was informed that you had already asked for those same colours.”

Hermione raised her eyebrows, doubtful.

“Is that right?”

“Oh, yes. This —” his gaze swept down her, lingering long enough that she felt herself stiffen, “— is precisely what I wanted.”

Frowning, she stepped away from the mirror to pluck Theodore up off his lap, taking him back into her own arms.

“My!” said Theodore, looking at her expectantly.

Tavaris understood him easily.

“Ma,” he corrected. “That’s your ma, Theodore.”

Hermione made a face.

“Ma?” she repeated dubiously.

“If I am to be Pa, then it is only fair that you should be Ma,” said Tavaris, admittedly very reasonably. He gave Theodore an encouraging nod. “*Ma*. Go on, give it a try.”

Theodore made a face of his own.

“*My*,” he said again, almost defensively.

“Don’t rush him,” said Hermione, very much defensively. “He’ll get there in his own time. Now,” she moved on, sitting down on the blood-orange loveseat adjacent to the armchair Tavaris currently occupied, “what is this about wanting me dressed in red and gold?”

“It’s necessary for you to give the right impression.”

“By parading about as a mascot of Gryffindor House?”

“By showing that you *are* one, even now.”

“Why is that so —?”

“My!” interjected Theodore, for a third time. He swatted Hermione, impatient. Still, she could not comprehend what he was so expectant of. “*My*. My!”

She let out an exasperated sigh. “Theodore, my love, I’m sorry, but I just don’t understand what you’re trying to tell me.”

“My of!” he downright shrieked, kicking his tiny feet.

“All right, *all right*. I hear you, my love, but —”

“*My of*!”

Helpless, she sighed again, glancing at Tavaris to exchange what she thought would be a commiserating look. Tavaris, however, was staring wide-eyed at Theodore, his mouth hanging partly open.

“My love,” he breathed. “Is that it, Theodore? My love?”

Hermione’s mouth fell open, too, then. She also stared at Theodore, waiting with bated breath for him to say it again.

“My of!”

She blinked, abruptly tearing up. “Oh, my God. Oh, my God! That’s — that’s —”

Tavaris slapped the arm of his chair, laughing loudly and triumphantly. He hoisted himself up to drop onto the loveseat beside them.

“My son is brilliant!” he exclaimed. “Not one word — oh, no — but *two*! Well *done*, Theodore! Well done, indeed.”

Hermione was actively crying now, meanwhile Theodore, in his obvious excitement over all the positive reinforcement, kept on repeating, again, and again, and again, in that ineffectively enunciated way that young children tended to speak, “My love.”

Because those were the words that he heard the most.

For weeks, Tavaris bragged, even going as far as to offer Abraxas money that Draco’s first word would really be just one word. Abraxas, being Abraxas, doubled it.

“And he’ll say *three* words!” he told them all confidently, while sat around the table in the formal dining room for Theodore’s first birthday lunch. “Three words, you’ll say, won’t you, Draco?”

Draco, two spots down in a highchair between his parents, stared at his grandfather blankly.

“My of!” Theodore shouted at him from between his own parents, pointing a few frosting-covered fingers at Hermione. “Aye, yeh?”

Draco sneezed. Theodore seemed to find this disappointing, because he went back to gobbling down his crumbles of cake, pouting deeply.

“Write it down,” Abraxas snapped at Evangeline, who merely raised her eyebrows at him over the brim of her goblet. “Come now, fifty Galleons that Draco says three words.” When still, she did not respond, he huffed, and added, “Dobby, fetch me my betting book!”

Dobby looked relieved to be given a reason to abandon his task of attempting to wipe an uncooperative Draco’s nose; he disappeared most promptly. Twenty seconds later, he returned, now holding in his skinny arms a quill, an inkwell, and a small notebook bound in black leather.

Hilariously, the pages of the notebook were filled almost entirely with Tavaris’ name.

Over dinner that night, Tavaris told Hermione, with a malevolent smirk, “Just you wait, Abraxas will be donating a *filthy* amount of gold to the Auror Office this winter.”

“Why on earth would he donate *anything* to the Auror Office?” Hermione asked him, nonplussed. “Would you not consider that to be rather redundant?”

“His ego cannot survive throwing any less gold at something than I do. Appearances, darling; maintaining them can often prove to be a mighty expense, particularly when one is as proud as a Malfoy.”

When the Saturday before Christmas finally arrived, Hermione felt no more prepared to return to the general public than she had two months before, but at least she looked like it.

Her hair had been lifted off her shoulders into a sleek updo, held in place by the gold hairpin embedded with rubies that Aunt Adalaide had gifted her the Christmas before; to match, another ruby lay nestled between her collarbones. Her lips, too, had been painted red. Aside from her wedding ring, every piece she wore, either alone or together, said very boldly, “I was a member of Gryffindor House, and I’ve not forgotten that.”

What Hermione now understood was that she was not meant to look like an entirely new person; her past was not meant to have been forgotten, and her personality was not meant to have been moulded into one more fitting of her station and the stereotype that accompanied it. Her appearance was not meant to give the impression that her decisions were made for her; it had to look like she had ended up where she had of her own free will.

No one could be permitted to think that she was pretending, not even for a second.

Beyond all of that, though, she feared she also appeared somewhat like — and she considered this a very poor thing to say, let alone think — the embodiment of a so-called scarlet woman. Really, she looked like she was someone’s mistress.

Or just their very young trophy wife, she thought unhappily, as she took in her finished look in the mirror of her vanity. At her back, Dinky was nodding to themselves in a pleased fashion, proud of their work.

Tavaris rose off the end of her four-poster to stand behind her. He was wearing a set of dress robes blacker than the darkest night, with threads of silver and gold entwined along the cuffs, shoulders, and lapels. He had shaved off the stubble he had kept letting reappear since Elias had died, and had even trimmed his hair, giving it a sharper cut. When she had pointed out the change, Tavaris had explained, "Although Lucius seems to think the length of his own hair makes him look refined, I personally have no interest in resembling one of those Muggle-loving self-proclaimed bohemians."

It was laughable that he thought he could ever be confused for someone who promoted peace over war.

"It's Goblin-made, you know," he said now, as Dinky trotted off to keep Theodore's alphabet blocks afloat when Crookshanks began taking great leaps to bat them down. "Commissioned by Godric Gryffindor himself. The hairpin, that is."

Hermione gaped at him in the mirror.

"Seriously?" she said, with equal parts of scepticism and wonder. "How did it wind up in the possession of the Notts?"

"It was a gift for his mistress," said Tavaris, only solidifying her worries over her current appearance, "who just so happened to be Sweterun Nott, the youngest of Theomund the First's two daughters, and the only Nott to have ever been Sorted into Gryffindor."

She eyed him warily.

"Just how young was she?"

"Young enough that to tell you would cause irreparable damage to whatever ideals you hold your cherished founder to."

Immediately, she grimaced. However, as was its tendency, her curiosity soon won out.

"What happened to her? To Sweterun."

"History has a way of changing itself over time," Tavaris started, as a small disclaimer, settling one hand on her shoulder, "and this chapter of it was not included in our recordings; it was passed down by word of mouth. But Sweterun was adventurous, or so the story goes. An untameable spirit. Everything that crossed her path was deemed worthy of exploration — *including*, it would seem, her mentor …

"The Notts still resided at Hogwarts at this time, you understand, even though Salazar Slytherin had long since left. Sweterun spent the entirety of her short adolescence exploring the castle grounds. One day, her sense of adventure led her to extending that exploration to the Black Lake. Unfortunately for her, she mistook kelp for gillyweed. Gryffindor had been watching from the shore, and by the time he realised something was amiss and went in after her, she was already dead, having been drowned by the Grindylow."

"That's a horrible story," said Hermione, aghast. "That poor girl."

Tavaris hummed in agreement, but then he shrugged, stepping away to pluck from her desk a vial of turquoise liquid which emitted a silver vapour.

“It’s quite a stupid mistake, I think,” he said unsympathetically. “Gillyweed resembles a slime-covered clump of rat tails more than it does kelp.”

He handed her the vial. Hermione eyed it shrewdly, then lifted it to her nose to inhale its scent; just as dank as the Draught of Peace should be when properly brewed. She exhaled slowly and downed the contents.

Theodore was tucked snugly into his new cot with Crookshanks and already drifting off to dreamland from the sound of Hermione singing *My Favourite Things* when she and Tavaris left out the front doors, setting off into the dim evening light.

The grounds were covered in a blanket of snow and the thinly frozen drive crunched under her heels. As they passed the gates, she came to a halt, glancing up at the still-rising full moon and letting out a stilted breath; it fogged the frosty air around her face, like the white smoke of a cigarette.

She thought of chocolate shared between two and of the trembling hands that broke it apart — of a fear that she might not want to touch it after he had.

“Aren’t you going to offer me a piece?”

“You — you want some?”

“Mione,” Tavaris said, drawing her back to the present. He nodded to the end of the drive, where a shiny, black Ministry car awaited them.

She drew her fur coat more securely around herself as she forced herself after him, shivering from more than just the cold. Although her heart was not racing and her stomach was not churning, there was still only so much a single dose of the Draught of Peace could do. So rarely did she leave the Nott Estate, and so rarely did it lead to anything good. That alone was reason enough for a bit of anxiety, but that alone was not the cause of it this evening.

Hermione caught up to Tavaris before he reached the dirt road, her gloved-fingers like ice as they gripped her coat. It was her most Mugglish winterwear, and that was the sole reason she had it on.

“Has it kicked in yet?” he asked, in an undertone.

“It should have.”

“I’d have brought more but I have no doubt we’ll all be searched upon arrival, as are the side-effects of Crouch’s paranoia.”

“That’s not paranoia; it’s common sense.”

“Whatever it is,” said Tavaris, as one of the car doors opened and their escort for the night stepped out, “Barty will have another vial on him should you require it.”

The driver wordlessly opened the door to the backseat.

There was no way it could have been a coincidence.

“Good evening, Auror Prewett.”

“Nott,” said their escort tersely. “Lady Nott.”

“Which one are you, out of curiosity?” asked Tavaris.

“Fabian. *Sir*.”

“Your son’s father, perhaps?”

“I thought so, but you can never really tell, can you?” Tavaris nudged Hermione forwards. “After you, darling.”

With great effort, she tore her eyes from Fabian Prewett and climbed into the leather interior of the backseat. Tavaris joined her after a second and Fabian shut the door behind him before returning to the driver’s seat. Her pulse made a valiant but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to quicken.

“These events tend to incite boredom,” Tavaris told her, as the car began to move. He had propped his walking-stick up against the seat between them and was reaching for the ice bucket on the side-bar, in which two glass flutes and a bottle of champagne were chilling. “Alcohol is the ideal aide. Too much, though, and you’ll wind up in the *Prophet* come Monday.” In a murmur that was mostly to himself, he added, “Merlin knows Elias had made that mistake before.”

Hermione met Fabian’s gaze in the rear-view mirror. His eyes were narrowed, unnervingly watchful. Swallowing thickly, she forced herself to look away.

She should have expected that a member of the Order of the Phoenix would be assigned as their escort — not solely for her, but for Tavaris, too. She wondered if he had known, or had at least predicted it, because if he had, she wanted to kick him for not having warned her. Then again, it was not hard to identify this evening as another test of the Dark Lord’s and his, and she never received any warning where those were concerned.

“Do you wish to open it or shall I?”

Hermione had never failed a test in her life; she took the bottle from Tavaris, putting on a smile. “A Shield Charm wouldn’t go amiss,” she told him, attempting playfulness, “so do watch out.”

“All right, don’t take my eyes out now —”

Pop!

The cork shot out to sadly not hit Tavaris’ head but the window beside it; the champagne bubbled up instantly, foaming over the rim of the bottle and spilling onto her gloved-hands

and the leather seat below. Laughter filled the car, none of it real.

“Quickly, quickly!” shrieked Hermione, holding the bottle away from her coat to avoid spraying the poor minks that had probably died for it. “The glasses!”

“Here, right here, don’t spill it.”

“A little late for that.”

“Really? I couldn’t tell.”

“Shut up. Hand me the other glass.”

“Have you ever opened a bottle of champagne before?”

“Are you calling me an amateur?”

“I wouldn’t dare.” Tavaris took the bottle, no longer foaming at the top, and stuck it back in the ice bucket. He then turned back to her, smirking, and raised his flute of champagne. “Cheers, darling.”

Hermione did not miss the approving glint in his eyes. She raised her own flute and tipped it in his direction.

“Cheers, Tavaris.”

Someone ought to have thrown roses at her feet.

As they carried on down the road, the blur of speed outside their windows turning a dark blue at the behest of the fallen sun, she and Tavaris talked and laughed as if they did so every day. She could already imagine what would be reported at the next meeting of the Order. She could also imagine what responses it would garner, particularly from the younger Order members, but those responses were not ones that she wished to dwell on. Besides, she feared she would be seeing some of them that night; their responses need not be imagined.

Perhaps it would be a wise idea to provide, whilst she could, at least one thing to report that would not keep her up at night knowing that it had been.

“So, Fabian — pardon me, Auror Prewett — whilst we have you with us, I wanted to apologise to you for when we last met.” Hermione surprised herself sometimes with how well she could lie.

“You’ll have to be more specific, Lady Nott,” said Fabian, his eyes ahead. “What is it you’re apologising for?”

“Only for how I acted. It was a very emotional time for us, given what happened to Elias Avery and the revelation regarding his loyalties, and you and your brother — I told you this then, but it merits repeating — you share a rather uncanny resemblance to someone else I have lost.”

“My condolences, then. He must have been a very handsome wizard.”

Tavaris swallowed a large sip of champagne, his jaw tight.

“He was handsome,” agreed Hermione. “But he was not a wizard —”

Fabian’s eyebrows rose —

“— and it is not your condolences that I’m looking for. You see, now that I have apologised to you, it’s your turn to do the same to me.”

He met her gaze again.

“My turn to apologise?” he clarified.

“Yes. For your insinuations against my son.”

His eyes darted right, to Tavaris, who was now sitting very stiffly, his face expressionless but his jaw no less clenched.

“And I would be tremendously grateful if you would please inform Auror Moody that he spoke his first words last month. *My love*, he said. I doubt any child of the father *you* had in mind would ever repeat words such as those so young, if they were to ever repeat them at all.”

“Well, then, forgive us for being so forward with our assumptions, Lady Nott,” said Fabian, after a minute, looking back at the road with an unreadable expression. “Rumours, you know — they tend to run rampant in this community.”

Hermione smiled humourlessly and leaned back to sip her drink.

“Isn’t that the truth.”

As though to prove something, either to Fabian, to Hermione, or even to himself, Tavaris moved his hand to rest on her thigh. This was no time to cause a scene, especially after that speech, so his hand stayed there for the remainder of the journey.

It must have been nearly an hour before the car was joined on its path by several others from the Ministry, every one of them transporting a party of guests who were known to possess abnormally large pockets, or else the influence to convince those who did to empty them.

The procession approached the wide mouth of a cave in a rocky cliffside, which was hidden beneath low-hanging vines and fully-bloomed flowers in cool shades of purple and blue that would not have appeared magical had it been a season in which flowers tended to bloom. On either side of the cave stood a pair of Aurors, joined each by two wizards dressed in purple tailcoats, white gauntlet gloves, and custodian helmets that bore an image of a wolf howling at the moon — the uniform of the Werewolf Capture Unit.

One Auror came up to each driver’s window to check that the face he found there was the right one, before signalling to the others to draw back the curtain of vines. Hermione watched

this happen four times before the Auror reached their car, the glowing tip of his wand acting as a torch.

Fabian rolled down the window to speak to him.

“All right so far?”

“No trouble yet,” said Kingsley Shacklebolt, with a startlingly boyish grin. He referenced a scroll of parchment, then ducked to peer into the back of the car. “Got the Notts back there, have you?”

Hermione had to catch herself at the last second before she gaped at the sight of his very far-from-bald head. For some reason — probably a rather senseless one — she had never expected him to have once grown out so much hair, let alone an afro quite that size.

She should have felt a longing to get out of the car to see him properly, she thought, or to speak up and never stop, to tell him all of what she had done and confess to all of it that had left him with a brother to mourn but not bury. The Draught of Peace had been brewed to perfection, however, so all she did was smile, hoping she looked like she might be a nice person.

“That’s them,” said Fabian, with a nod, and then he added, as any brother would, “Gideon here yet?”

“Four cars ahead of you,” Kingsley told him.

Fabian nodded a second time, now with relief. He rolled the window back up as Kingsley stepped away to give the signal, and then the curtains were parting to admit them. Hermione stared at Kingsley out the back window until they fell once more, obscuring her view.

“He’s young,” she said, turning back as they followed the car ahead of them down an unlit tunnel. “How long has he been an Auror?”

“He was fresh out of training when Gideon and I joined up,” Fabian told her, with some hesitation, as if he were suspicious as to why she was asking. “So that’d be about — what — five years, now?”

“So you’ve been Aurors for four years yourselves?”

“Right.”

“And do you like it?” asked Hermione, trying hard not to pay attention to just how dark it was in the tunnel — far darker than the night sky, bathed in dense shadows apart from the rear of the car in front, which was highlighted by their dimmed headlights. “I imagine you must be very busy, given the wizarding world’s current state of affairs, but I suppose if you’ve chosen to join the Auror Office then you’d be glad to not be stuck on desk-duty all the time.”

Tavaris gave her leg a squeeze and she took his hand for something to cling to. She was not so much a fan of the dark, these days. Since that July night, she had been sleeping with her

candles lit.

“No, a desk is definitely not the spot for me,” said Fabian. “I don’t know how my brother-in-law copes with such immense suffrage.”

Hermione tittered uncomfortably.

“I never imagined myself at a desk of any sort, either, when I was younger,” said Tavaris conversationally. “I lacked the ability to sit still for long periods of time.”

She looked at him in surprise. “I can’t picture you ever being particularly hyperactive.”

His eyes dropped to his walking-stick. He gripped her hand back, digging his nails in.

Oh, right.

At last, they emerged from the tunnel to be welcomed by a line of lampposts lit by restlessly buzzing Glow Bugs, whose fluorescent-yellow beams appeared to reflect off the layer of frost atop the snow.

Proceeding along a circling drive in neat order, the cars rounded a great relic of a fountain, which shot about twelve feet into the air and was made up of limestone. Uplifted at the centre was a gold statue, to which the fountain owed its height, and plunged into the top of its stone pedestal was a large sword; on the handle rested the golden hand of Merlin himself, whose other hand held his wand up as if it were the true mighty weapon in his magical legend.

“*Fons est Caliburnus*,” murmured Tavaris.

“The Fountain of Excalibur.” Hermione glanced back at him to add, untruthfully, “I’ve only ever seen pictures of it.”

Further round they went, until the statue of Merlin had its back to them. Fabian slowed to a stop before a maroon carpet that extended to and up a set of grand stone steps.

The Merlin Hall of Fame stood tall and proud at eight centuries old, no less marvellous than it had been when it was first constructed, and no less an accomplishment to visit in the decades onward in time.

Now looking out Tavaris’ window on the left, Hermione could see the party of three who had ridden in the car before them, their faces set alight by the bright flashes of cameras on both sides of the carpet. She had hoped that, in this time, she would not be someone whom anyone wished to photograph, but if Evan and his parents were being subjected to it, she was out of luck.

Tavaris leaned in to whisper in her ear as a near-teenager in a white tailcoat came to let them out.

“Just be yourself, and all shall be fine.”

If only Hermione could better remember who that was.

The door opened. Tavaris grabbed his walking-stick and began helping himself out of the car. She lingered a moment longer in reluctance before forcing herself to grasp the hand that awaited her and allow it to draw her from the car.

Tavaris bent his arm for her to take and she raised her chin as best she could as the cameras began to flash.

In that moment, while making their way down the carpet and pausing for questions on current events and recent legislation thrown at Tavaris by reporters, Hermione thought randomly of a film her parents had once put on for Rose and Hugo and which had left Ron mystified and ranting, ironically, about the madness of talking animals for weeks on end.

"Just smile and wave, boys. Smile and wave."

And then together into the warmly-lit Entrance Hall she and Tavaris went, its ceiling high and coffered and its walls laden with arched alcoves, where there stood suits of armour extending chivalrous greetings and season's tidings. They followed the running carpet atop a marble floor to the long line of guests waiting to be ushered in.

Creighton Rosier nodded at them, his wife, Ena, on his arm.

"Evening, Tavaris. And you, Lady Nott. May I just say how lovely you —"

"Hello, Evan," said Hermione briskly, ignoring Creighton entirely. "You're looking quite dashing tonight."

Evan, who was peering over the line of heads in search of something unknown and fiddling distractedly with the white bowtie at his neck, barely spared her a glance.

"Same to you, Mione," he said, with splendid indifference.

"Where have you lot been sat?" asked Tavaris.

"Table Three," said Ena. Smiling, she patted her husband on the arm. "To be with Creighton's sister Petra and her husband — François Durand, perhaps you've heard of him? He's the new Director of the French Bureau of Magical Justice."

As a matter of fact, Hermione had heard of François Durand. Better yet, she had met him.

Back when she had been the Head of Magical Law Enforcement, there had been a large dispute between her department and the Ministry of Magical Affairs of France's Bureau of Magical Justice. She and her least favourite co-worker, Atlas Adley, had been forced to travel to Paris for a weekend-long litigation to fight for the jurisdiction to charge one of their citizens for breaking the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery whilst on holiday in Wales.

Seeing as how Durand was his great-uncle and had still held a great amount of influence within the Bureau of Magical Justice at the time, Draco had — there was no other word for it — finessed his way into joining Hermione and Atlas on the trip. It had proved to be quite an interesting experience, thanks to a nasty cold, a forced Pepper-Up Potion, and an allergic

reaction that Draco had, after much coercion and with profound reluctance and mortification, claimed to be called, "*A case of the Woozles*."

The Woozles, it had turned out, was a highly abnormal sort of allergic reaction, in which Draco — although fully recovered from his cold — was left with exactly zero filter or impulse control and prone to spontaneous fits of laughter, nonsensical babbling, and inexplicable urges to suddenly run away from them. It had come as no shock when they had lost the litigation, and Draco had informed Hermione, in no uncertain terms, that if she were to ever tell Ron or Harry what had happened, he would curse her entire family.

She had told Ginny instead.

"Would that not, in all likelihood, place you with the Head of International Magical Cooperation as well?" said Tavaris, as they shuffled up the line and Hermione pursed her lips to hide her amusement at the memory.

"Blimey, it might," said Creighton, frowning deeply. "That's unfortunate."

Further up the line they went, more guests joining as they arrived, either from the main entrance or from a hall off to the right, which Hermione knew to hold the Floo.

From behind them, she heard a familiar fretful voice.

"They'll be all right, won't they?"

"I'm sure they'll be fine, dear," a second familiar voice replied patiently. "My mother knows how to handle a house full of boys. She's perfectly equipped to look after ours for a few hours."

"Well, I don't know if I'd say *that*. She once told me a teaspoon of firewhiskey was all that was necessary to put a teething baby to sleep. *A teaspoon of firewhiskey*, for heaven's sake!"

The line shuffled forwards again, and Tavaris had to nudge Hermione to get her move. Unable to resist, she twisted round.

"Pardon me, I couldn't help but overhear. A teaspoon of firewhiskey, you said?"

Molly Weasley nodded with a huff. She, and Arthur beside her, must have been just over thirty years old. They were dressed in the finest attire likely available to them, which had perhaps come from either or both of their parents, or else from the depths of Great-Aunt Muriel's floral-wallpapered estate.

"Just outrageous, don't you think?"

Hermione smiled. "My own son is just one, and I'd never dream of giving him firewhiskey, regardless of whether or not he keeps us up at night."

"Oh, he'll be nearly the same age as our youngest, then!" said Molly brightly. "Ron was born back in March. Perhaps they'll be at Hogwarts together."

“I believe they will be,” said Hermione, her smile only growing. She felt pleasantly warm all the way down to her toes. “Theodore’s birthday was only last month.”

“Oh, that’s a precious name for a little boy.” Molly held out her hand, smiling back. “I’m Molly Weasley, dear, and this is my husband, Arthur.”

“Lovely to meet you,” said Arthur kindly.

“And you, sir,” said Hermione honestly, taking Molly’s hand to shake it gently. She didn’t ever want to let go, but Arthur was holding his hand out next, so she did to shake his, too. She hesitated to let go of that one as well. “It’s Mione, by the way. My name.”

“Mione, darling.”

She looked up at Tavaris, who had not so much as paid Molly and Arthur a single glance. He nodded to her right.

They had reached the front of the line. Looking at them expectantly from behind a long mahogany counter was an unsmiling Amelia Bones.

“Oh. Hello, Amelia,” said Hermione, swallowing. “It’s wonderful to see you again.”

Amelia pursed her lips, giving a short hum.

“It’s certainly been a while, hasn’t it?” she said, not rudely but not quite kindly, either. If anything, she seemed calculating. “Wands, please.”

From his cloak, Tavaris retrieved both his and Hermione’s wands and set them on the counter. Beside Amelia, a security witch dressed in peacock-blue robes weighed them each on a vibrating brass instrument rather like a scale.

“Eleven inches, elm, dragon-heartstring core, registered under the name Tavaris C. Nott, been in use for forty-two years,” the witch gathered from a slip of paper that had shot out the bottom of the instrument. She looked up, disinterested. “Correct?”

“Correct,” said Tavaris, and she slid his wand back to him before taking Hermione’s to weigh next.

“Nine-and-a-half inches, cedar, Thestral-hair core — hmph, I’ve never seen that before — registered under the name Mione Nott —”

Hermione glanced sideways to find that Molly’s and Arthur’s friendly smiles had fallen, and they were now exchanging a significant look. The latter subtly inched forwards to position himself in front of his wife.

Her heart sank.

Behind the desk, the witch was squinting. “Been in use for ten years, that say, Amelia?”

Amelia peered at the slip of paper and, with a frown, at the wand. The shrewdness of her expression grew more pronounced.

“Yes. Ten should be right. I don’t know why the ink’s so faint, though.”

Barty must have forged a few papers registering this wand, thought Hermione, as it was returned to her. Tavaris made no move to stop her from putting it in her pocket.

Frowning still, Amelia bent her head to scan a list, check them off, and reference the seating chart next.

“You two are at Table Three,” she said. “Please move forwards so that Robards can search you for any prohibited weapons, goods, or materials that may or may not be on your person.”

Tavaris leaned in as if he thought he had heard wrong.

“Table Three? According to our invitation, we were to be seated at Table Six.”

“Well, it says Three right here, Mr Nott. Now, kindly move forwards so that I can check-in the next party.”

“Very well, thank you, Miss Bones. Come along, darling.”

He led Hermione away from Amelia, Molly, and Arthur, stopping them next in front of Gawain Robards, who would one day be Head of the Auror Office, and later, of Magical Law Enforcement: Hermione’s predecessor and, for a time, her boss. Right now, though, he was dressed in the steel-coloured robes indicative of the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol.

“Cloaks,” Robards grunted mechanically, and Tavaris removed his slowly, alternating which hand he used to balance himself with on his walking-stick. Robards rummaged through his cloak and then through Hermione’s coat of animal cruelty before passing them both to another witch behind the lengthy desk, who gave them each a pink slip of paper with the numbers *211* and *212* on them.

Hermione did a double-take before recognising the witch as Madam Twilfitt’s assistant, Miss Ebner. Numbly, she realised that Miss Ebner must have been sacked for revealing her Muggle heritage in the presence of the Malfoy women.

“You next, ma’am.”

Blinking in a near start, Hermione moved closer to receive an extremely surreal pat-down from Robards, who didn’t appear entirely sure there was anything to pat down at all without outright groping, judging by his frown and the way his hands hovered hesitantly over her. He did not pull at her gloves, nor ask her to remove them, and he nodded unconcernedly when he was done. He returned their wands to them, in addition to a small chequebook, and all three items went directly into an inner-pocket of Tavaris’ robes. Then Robards was waving them in the direction of the next pair of open doors and calling over the next party.

“Table Three,” Tavaris repeated to himself, as he and Hermione walked on, arm-in-arm once more. He seemed oblivious to her inescapable glances over her shoulder. “I haven’t been sat

at anything above Five since my father played host to this event."

Arthur caught her eye as he was getting his pockets checked and she quickly faced forwards again.

"We'll be with the Rosiers," she said. Her eyes felt worryingly wet. "Isn't that where Ena said they'd be sitting?"

"Yet we were supposed to be with the Malfoys. Abraxas and I have always sat together." Tavaris sounded both suspicious and on the verge of sulking.

They arrived at the next set of doors, held open by a couple of bored-looking security trolls. Down a short set of marble steps was a massive room filled with over a hundred round tables set with white tablecloths, gleaming silver candlesticks, plates, and goblets, and centrepieces of red poinsettias. Candles floated on clouds of holly below the painted ceiling, the marble columns and balusters that held each tier were dressed in pine-needle garlands, and in each corner was a tree decorated with silver, indigo, and maroon baubles, as well as at least two-dozen more candles each.

As Hermione and Tavaris descended to the ground level, guests milled all about, making pleasantries and taking drinks and hors d'oeuvres off trays carried by house-elves in violet pillowcases with a golden sword stitched onto their fronts. Some guests gazed curiously up at the stage on the far end of the room, as though trying to guess what the entertainment would be based on the instruments already set up there. Others, meanwhile, were up on the raised platform that followed along the four walls and connected to the stage, either sat at the bar or strolling as they took in the hundreds upon hundreds of portraits that hung there, for which the room had been named.

The Hall of Portraits, where the memory of every witch or wizard who had ever been awarded an Order of Merlin lived on in a frame of gilded gold. On the two tiers above, more portraits hung, and it was the topmost one where, in 2020, three gold plaques in a row saved the spots for Hermione's, Ron's, and Harry's.

Tavaris nodded at several people as he and Hermione made their way purposefully across the floor, but stopped for no one. They passed the Rosiers, who were now in conversation with Evan's sister and the other Selwyns; the Parkinsons, the Bulstrodes, and the Greengrasses, who were finding their shared seats; Professor Slughorn with a flute of champagne and a whole group of faces who had or one day would have their own posters; the Traverses, who were chatting with Barty and his mother; the Macmillans, who stood with a young Amos Diggory and his wife, in addition to a pink-gowned Dolores Umbridge and a dreary-looking Lyall Lupin; and Augusta, Algie, and Enid Longbottom, who were welcoming — of all people — Great-Aunt Muriel to their table.

Hermione's chest felt tight, her skin chilled. *Maybe we misjudged my tolerance,* she thought to herself, and decided that she needed to see Barty for another dose of the Draught of Peace as soon as possible.

The standing card for Table Three was found up at the front, on the right side of the stage and just a metre away from where Professor Dumbledore, dressed in vibrant robes of patterned

mistletoe, was nodding at something Minister Bagnold was saying.

Casting her eyes away from him, lest he looked over and met her gaze, Hermione located the place card with *Lady M. Nott* printed on it in black calligraphy. The one to her right, she was relieved to discover, merely read, *Madam Undersecretary I. Roth*, and directly beneath it, *German Ministry of Magic* — someone she did not know, and therefore, someone who hopefully did not know her.

Her relief lasted no longer than a second, however, for beside her, Tavaris cursed under his breath, and said in a low, unmistakably annoyed voice, “Someone tampered with the seating chart.”

Hermione lifted her gaze to discover him glaring not at his own place card but at the one to its left. With steadily mounting apprehension, she leaned across him to read the swooping, black letters of the name that had been written there.

Mr S. Black.

Chapter End Notes

For those who didn't grasp the film reference, Hermione was quoting the penguins from Madagascar.

Regarding the argument between Hermione and the Malfoy women, I thought the wizarding world, stuck in the 1800s as it is, would use very old terminology in reference to the LGBTQ2+ community — i.e. "sapphists," "sodomites," and "transvestites." It seems more fitting to me than having people like the Malfoys or the Blacks knowing words like "bisexuality" or "genderfluid."

Now, prepare yourselves for a lot of familiar faces...

Friend or Foe

Chapter Summary

> I hope you find some peace of mind in this lifetime
> (Tell them, tell ‘em, tell them the truth)
> I hope you find some paradise
> (Tell ‘em, tell ‘em the truth)
> (Tell ‘em, tell ‘em, tell ‘em, tell ‘em your—)
> — United in Grief, Kendrick Lamar

Chapter Notes

> CW: Minor Character Death, that godforsaken pink toad, misuse/overuse of anti-anxiety medication, and behaviour exceedingly similar to that of the teenage girls who may or may not have once made your life miserable.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Five minutes later, Tavaris looked just as peeved, except now he had Abraxas to do the complaining for him.

“The nerve of him, switching the seats like that. There’s never been a time we haven’t sat together! Not ever!”

He sounds like a first-year who’s been told they can’t have their best friend as their Potions partner, Hermione thought, and Evangeline was side-eyeing him as though thinking along those same lines, but Abraxas was a Malfoy who had been denied something, so whether he was aware of this fact or not, it did not deter him.

“They know, Tavaris,” he continued to rant, gesturing with his champagne flute in an aggravated manner. “They *know* they are better off having us at the same table! That’s how they get their gold, in any case, because of you and your incessant need to dole out more than me.”

Tavaris raised an eyebrow at that.

“I feel quite confident that it’s the other way around.”

“What does *that* mean, ‘the other way around?’”

He lifted one shoulder with feigned ignorance.

Abraxas stuck his chin up, and said pompously, “That’s what I thought.”

“Respectfully, Father,” said Lucius, waving his hand in dismissal as a house-elf came up to silently offer them deviled eggs, “I do not believe the motivation behind the changes to the seating arrangement had anything to do with splitting the two of you up.” He waited for his father to meet his gaze, then let his eyes flit to Hermione, who glared at him.

“Your deduction skills are astounding, Lucius,” said Abraxas, looking anything but astounded. “And here I thought Sirius Black moved Tavaris and Mione to his own table just to spoil my night.”

“What is this about Sirius?”

Hermione turned to find Melania Black standing directly behind her, dressed in a frost-blue gown that one wouldn’t expect to be so flattering on a woman of her age. With her came Cygnus, Druella, Irma, and Pollux.

“Don’t tell me he is here tonight,” said Druella. The very thought appeared to alarm her; her gloved fingers were inching upward as if itching to clutch at the string of pearls round her neck.

“He’s had the seating chart tampered with, Mother,” Narcissa told her in an undertone. “Evan and Uncle Creighton and Aunt Ena were moved so he could sit by Mione. I suspect Aunt Petra and her husband might have been, too.”

The Blacks all exchanged meaningful looks. After a minute, Melania decided, “It is awfully good fortune that Walburga’s invite got lost in the post, then,” and they all proceeded to pretend that Walburga had been put on the guestlist and not been left out due to her late son’s allegiances.

Esther Avery had not received an invitation either, even though Gaspar and Bedelia had managed to secure one for themselves. According to a deeply aggrieved Gaspar, this feat had involved making a hefty donation to the Wizarding Supporters of Scottish Rugby Union.

Walburga and Esther were currently together at Grimmauld Place, stewing in their shared bitterness.

“What I’d like to know is how he managed to get himself invited,” said Irma, dumbfounded. “He has no connections, no affiliation with the Ministry or anyone of importance there — not since he ran off like a rotten scoundrel into the night five years ago.”

“Yes, indeed. What has he done to crop back up now — dropped himself into the lap of the highest bidder?” said Pollux.

“I can assure you that his date did not pay him for the pleasure of his company,” said Hermione, gazing off at Table Three in the distance. It was empty now, but not for much longer. “All she would’ve had to do was ask her parents if he could tag along.”

“Ah, that one,” said Cygnus. He shared a look of silent communication with his father, before adding tentatively, “The situation could be worse, I suppose.”

“Worse?” said Irma, in a shrill hiss. “Cygnus Phineas Black, do not tell me you are referring to that blonde, blood-traitor brat of Le—”

“Do stop talking, Irma,” Hermione hastened to interrupt, in a too-high voice. She plastered a smile on her face; taking this as the warning sign that it was, Melania, Druella, Narcissa, and Evangeline all quickly did the same.

“Horace!” Abraxas exclaimed.

“Abraxas!” Professor Slughorn cried cheerfully, as he came bustling into their circle to clasp Abraxas’ hand, a drink that had smoke rising off the top held at a precarious angle in his other. “Good to see you, m’boy!”

Perpetually infatuated with all things loud and lavish, Professor Slughorn was dressed in velvet robes of emerald-green, his round belly protruding from its depths to show off a magenta waistcoat done up with what must have been some exceptionally strong gold buttons.

“And you’ve brought the whole family! My, that is a *lovely* dress, Evangeline, and yours as well, of course, Narcissa, my dear — oh, Tavaris, Cygnus! I hadn’t even spotted you two! Not hiding from me, are you?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Horace,” said Tavaris, mockingly solemn, and Professor Slughorn laughed and swatted him gently on the arm like he was a disobedient dog he couldn’t help but love.

“Always a pleasure, Horace,” said Cygnus, when his hand was clasped next.

Professor Slughorn went on to greet the rest of the Blacks present. Of the lot, he spoke most amicably with Melania, who graciously accepted his kiss on the cheek and called him fondly, “Ace.”

“How have you been fairing, sir?”

“Oho, not as good as *you* have by the sound of it, Tavaris!” he said, waggling his eyebrows. He turned to Hermione. “Hello, Mione. Or should I say, *Lady* Mione.”

“You can just call me Mione, Professor,” she said, smiling tightly still.

“If I may, I shall!” He took her hand to kiss her laced-covered knuckles. “You’ve done exceedingly well for yourself, my dear. The lady of a great house, already with a son and heir — although I must tell you what a surprise it was to hear of it. Why, I’d have sooner expected to find you here one day as Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement!”

Well, you will eventually.

“As swiftly as I think she could work her way up to a position like that, Mione felt that there were more important things, given all that has happened and all that continues to happen.” Tavaris gazed down at her as patiently as he was probably capable of. “Didn’t you, darling?”

“At this point in time, and for me, personally, yes.” Hermione resisted the urge to take another sip from her drink; an excess of alcohol tended to disbalance the effects of the Draught of Peace. She gestured to Professor Slughorn with her glass, her other hand tucked into the crook of Tavaris’ arm. “But what about yourself, Professor? How has retirement been treating you?”

“Just splendidly, my dear, just splen—”

“My goodness, is that Professor Dumbledore talking to the Minister?”

“Very smooth, Lady Nott,” murmured Cygnus, after Professor Slughorn had promptly excused himself to “catch up with dear old Albus.”

“A complete sycophant if I ever saw one,” sniggered Pollux.

“I never knew you were able to see them, Grandfather.”

All at once, the Blacks froze, any visible mirth or contentment dissipating in the span of a millisecond.

“Perhaps I’m mistaken, but wouldn’t that require removing your head from your arse?”

Hermione forced herself to turn. There, standing on her right and just behind his aunt and uncle, was Sirius.

She suddenly understood why everyone had so quickly believed he was the one who had betrayed the Potters. Since leaving Hogwarts, he had grown darker, his eyes a glinting grey of distrust even as he joked; his smile was now sharp, the bones of his face more apparent in their severe angles; his skin was twice as pale, no pink in his cheeks from the remnants of barking laughter or an abundance of joyous drink; his shoulders were broad, stretched taut, his spine like a metal pole; and he had cut his hair short, the rebelliously long locks exchanged for an almost utilitarian trim.

He had never looked more like a Black.

Although he did not look at Hermione, Sirius’ body was angled towards her as if she were the one whom he had been approaching, only to have gotten side-tracked by the presence of his family.

In an instant, Pollux had gone off, sneering across at him.

“What are *you* doing here, boy? Skulking about as if you still belong among these folk, after what little you’ve managed to make of yourself.”

“Nice. You haven’t changed one bit,” said Sirius, with a frigid grin. He tilted his head from side to side, pretending to rethink that statement while he looked Pollux over. “Well, you

have gotten older, obviously — and considerably fatter."

"You leave your grandfather alone!" said Irma, pointing at Sirius with one of her stubby, ring-bearing fingers. "You chose to do with yourself what you have and you've no right to force your presence upon us now. Away with you!"

"He's not a dog, Irma," Melania cut in, speaking out of the corner of her mouth. At the same time and with the same level of covertness, she, Druella, Narcissa, and Evangeline all peered about to ensure no one was overhearing this.

"Even if he chooses to conduct himself like one," muttered Abraxas, and Lucius had to raise his glass to his lips to hide his smirking. Hermione was faintly proud of Tavaris for not laughing.

"I'm sure if I were to shove him at those wizards from the Werewolf Capture Unit out front, they would fail to tell the difference! With any luck, they would throw him in with that *other* breed of sorry mutts."

Had there not been so many people present and talking, nor a string quartet playing up on the stage, the combined efforts of Pollux and Irma would have likely already gathered a small crowd between Tables Six and Nine. Nevertheless, Sirius had looked unperturbed right until the Werewolf Capture Unit had been brought up.

He shifted to face them squarely.

Tavaris nudged Hermione with his elbow to get her attention. Giving her a significant look, he inclined his head in the direction of Sirius. It took a second for her to cotton on, and several seconds more for her to gather the courage to go through with it.

"You've reminded me, where is my mother tonight? Was Walburga even invited, or did her reputation go to the dirt right along with Reg— *oomph*!"

Hermione had barrelled into him so fast that he hadn't seen her coming, her arms flung around his neck and her face hidden against his jaw; he caught her around the waist, probably on instinct alone, and her heels lifted momentarily off the floor.

"Sirius, thank God! Finally, some rational company!"

It seemed to take Sirius a beat to register just who had leapt on him, because a second later, his arms had tightened around her waist, his hold firm enough that she would only be able to back away when and if he chose to let her. Sounding winded, he said, "Hey, Mione. Haven't seen you in a while."

"A very long while," she said, in heartfelt agreement.

"What the hell are you doing subjecting yourself to the traumatic presence of these frigid old banshees?"

There was an indignant scoff.

“Oh, don’t pretend that isn’t a perfectly apt description of you, Irma,” said Hermione, as Sirius relinquished his hold enough to let her off the points of her shoes. He kept an arm draped over her shoulders, as though he thought she might run off if given half the chance.

“I implore you not to encourage him, Lady Nott,” said Melania. “He hardly needs any more incentive to cause a scene.”

“Don’t trouble yourself, Grandmama,” said Sirius, his tone falsely light, but not quite light enough to cover up the biting undercurrent. “Mione and I have some catching up of our own to do, and I’m sure we’d both rather do it far away from wherever you lot are.”

Melania stared at him for a moment, her expression inscrutable. Then she said, “You once called me that name with far less venom in your voice.”

The words had barely left her mouth before she returned to herself. She raised her chin, rolled her shoulders back, and excused herself to find her daughter; Lucretia, who had not been disowned for marrying a Prewett.

“Right, then.” Hermione smiled amidst the awkwardness. She patted Sirius on the chest. “I’d like to introduce you to my husband. This is —”

“— Tavaris Nott,” finished Sirius, in a cool voice. “Yes. We’ve met.”

“Of course, you have,” she said, feeling dumb.

He angled them both to better face Tavaris.

“You know, I believe the last time we spoke was when I was fourteen and my parents dragged me to a dinner party at your estate. You were celebrating your — what — forty-sixth?”

“Forty-seventh,” said Tavaris, appearing unbothered. “Indeed, I seem to recall you trying to teach your brother and Rabastan Lestrange to slide down the railings of the stairwell in the hope that one or both of them would wind up with a broken bone.”

“I’m touched that you’ve retained such fond memories of my childhood. Old as you’ve been getting, I’d started to wonder if your memory might be fading.”

“Not yet, thankfully.” Drawing attention in turn to his walking-stick and Hermione’s drink that he now held, he added, “I’d offer you a hand but, as you can see, I have none left.”

“I wouldn’t have shaken it, anyway.”

“Who’ve you come with?” Hermione piped up, as if she hadn’t already guessed. With Professor Dumbledore so close, she and Tavaris had not risked peeking at the other place cards at their table, but, with their combined knowledge, it had hardly been difficult to deduce what party Sirius would have had to accompany in order to be seated at the same table as the Undersecretary to the German Minister for Magic.

“Marlene and her family,” said Sirius, craning his neck to scan the crowd, “although I did lose her at some point. My guess is she got roped into a conversation with some acquaintance of her mother’s.”

“Shall I help you find her?” Hermione offered bravely.

“Yes,” said Tavaris, before Sirius could answer. “There’s someone I need to find myself before we’re all seated.”

He stepped closer; Sirius’ arm tensed around her shoulders.

“I’ll meet you at the table, darling,” murmured Tavaris, brushing a kiss to her temple. He pressed her drink back into her hand and disappeared into the crowd.

Sirius plucked the champagne flute right out of Hermione’s grasp and set it on the tray of a passing house-elf.

“It’s been perfectly dreadful catching up,” he told the group blithely. “We should definitely never do it again some time.”

“For once, we are in accordance,” said Pollux snidely.

“A good note to leave off on, don’t you think?”

Sirius and Narcissa exchanged equally disinterested looks, exuding a degree of haughtiness that made their relation obvious, and then he turned his back to his family and the Malfoys. With no other words to say or be heard, he led Hermione away from Tables Six and Nine.

“I don’t know how you managed to listen to their talk for so long,” she said. “Honestly, I’ve been losing my mind.”

“Funny, you should say that. It’s been one of our leading theories.”

Sirius steered her round a table full of Selwyns and Rosiers, all of whom watched them pass with wide eyes. They did not make it a metre before their path was blocked by Lancaster and Fiona.

“Lady Mione!” said the latter, smiling widely. “I was hoping I might see you here.”

“She has been terribly distraught that you’ve yet to accept the invitation to join the Ladies’ Tea Society,” Lancaster informed Hermione. “My mother and sister as well.”

“It’s true, even I’ve gotten my ear talked off about it,” said Evan, appearing beside them. “For my sake, Lady Mione, please, just tell them you’ll attend.”

His sister rolled her eyes.

“Don’t be so dramatic, Evan. I merely think Lady Mione would enjoy the chance to get out, partake in a discussion with no male involvement and —”

“Well, when you put it like that,” said Hermione, “it’s even harder to refuse.”

“Then why must you?” bemoaned Fiona.

“Because you’re a bunch of vain cows who like to talk about other people’s shit despite your own tendencies to stink up a chamber pot.”

“Oh, dear. Let’s not resort to that language, please.”

“I’m only telling the truth, Mione,” said Sirius unapologetically. “Can they say the same?” With a sidelong look, he added, “Can you?”

Fiona tittered, at a clear loss.

“Let us get you a drink, Lady Nott,” said Lancaster, recovering smoothly. “It’s appalling that your hand has been left barren for so long. That is a sign of some very neglectful company.”

“You should join us,” said Evan. “My aunt and uncle shall be arriving soon, and my mother was hoping to introduce y—”

Sirius took care to knock shoulders with him when he shoved past.

It was the Lestranges who intercepted them next.

“Are you lost, Mione?”

Hermione forced a laugh.

“I assure you I’m not. Tavaris has someone with whom he needs to speak so he’s allowed Sirius to keep me company in his absence.”

I am where I’m supposed to be.

Edmund gave a slow nod of understanding.

“Carry on, then,” he said airily, and he gave her a highly unnecessary peck on the cheek. He, Desdemona, and Rabastan then drifted out of the way without further fuss.

Hermione let out a puff of breath.

“Thank goodness, Bellatrix didn’t see fit to join them.”

“Not a fan of hers, I take it?” said Sirius, marching them onwards at a quicker pace now.

“There’s little to be a fan *of*. Slow down, would you, I haven’t the shoes for this.”

If anything, he moved faster.

“From what I’ve heard, I’ve no doubt she has her claws out whenever *you're* in the room.”

Hermione willed herself to ignore that. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Paulus Parkinson rising from his seat at Table Ten and shook her head minutely; he sat back down, signalling for Morcant Bulstrode to do the same.

“Nothing to say about that, eh?” said Sirius churlishly. His fingers were digging into her bare shoulder now, sure to leave a rosy imprint on her skin.

“Is there something you want me to say?” asked Hermione, trying to swallow past the sudden dryness in her mouth.

“There’s a lot that I want you to say, Mione. At this point, though, I’m willing to settle for just about anything. Tell me if you spot a blonde.”

“Now I’m confused,” she lied. “And there are plenty of blondes. What colour is her dress?”

“*Amethyst*, apparently. This is a hard thing to be confused about.”

“Jewel tones for the winter season,” she recalled, with a hollow laugh.

Craning his neck, Sirius managed to locate Marlene, or so Hermione thought; she could not see over the sea of heads herself. He strode in a new direction with increased purpose.

“Stefan!”

A young man in possession of an easy stance and amber hair that fell loosely about his ears turned at the sound of his name.

“There he is,” he said, drawing the attention of his companions. “We’d wondered where you’d gotten to.”

“I had some people to find,” said Sirius.

A woman came to stand at the shoulder of the man called Stefan. Her face was not one Hermione had seen before, but it was inexplicably familiar all the same; freckled and rosy, brows as thick as the golden-brown hair plaited down her back, and eyes of the brightest blue.

“Family reunion?” she said, giving Sirius a peculiar look.

“The warmest.”

A second man, who stood at Stefan’s other side and looked very much like him — albeit with a straighter back and a tighter collar — sighed and said, “I don’t understand why you would do that to yourself.”

“I’m secretly a masochist. But that’s a conversation for another time.” Sirius made a sweeping gesture. “Mione, meet Aisling, Stefan, and Walter McKinnon.”

Hermione’s mind went blank, which was very poor timing.

“I hadn’t expected it to be so easy to tear her away,” said Aisling McKinnon, who looked less like her twin brother and more like their mother.

“He was strangely willing to let her go.”

“Was he, now?” said Walter, narrowing his eyes.

The three McKinnons assessed Hermione in the same half-curious and half-suspicious way that Edgar Bones, Moody, and Gideon and Fabian all had. She could sense it, them considering the rumours, seeking their own answers, and drawing their own conclusions. This was the wrong group for her to be amongst when it was the estranged family of the woman in front of her whom she had to reach; the Traverses were with the Crouches still, and there was a vial somewhere on Barty’s person that she was quite desperate for.

The words came without thought, natural. “It’s a pleasure to meet you all,” she said, extending her hand with a smile. “I’m Mione Nott.”

Stefan shook it.

“We know.”

“Your reputation precedes you,” said Aisling.

“So I’ve heard,” said Hermione uneasily. She tried to clear her throat. “Is Marlene with you?”

“She didn’t make it past security,” said Walter, shooting an exasperated look at the entrance to the Hall, “too preoccupied with pestering Amelia Bones while she’s trying to do her job.”

“Well —” she tangled her fingers together, unsure of what to do with her hands, “— I suppose I’ll see her once we’re seated, won’t I?”

“Have you and your husband have been sat with us, then?”

As if you didn’t already know that.

Walter frowned suddenly, gazing at some point over her shoulder; a second later, someone was dislodging Sirius’ arm to bring their hands down on her shoulders and cry, “*Surprise*!”

Hermione jumped, letting out a small shriek. With her hand to her heart, she spun; once she saw who had snuck up on her, she smacked him on the chest.

“*Really*!”

Theomund Nott dropped his hands with a booming, unrepentant laugh.

“My Lady, all in good spirit —”

“I do not appreciate being snuck up on!” Hermione huffed, her cheeks warm. She was hyper-aware of the people watching from behind her. “What are you doing here?”

“We have come to represent the German,” said Theomund, grinning still. He placed his hand on the back of the cherry-haired woman beside him. “Dies ist Lady Nott — Mione. Die Frau meines englischen Cousins.”

“Ach, ja. ‘Ow do you do?”

“Lady Mione, this is Madam Ida Roth, Unterstaatssekretär bei der German Ministerin für Magie — Undersecretary.”

“Ida,” repeated Hermione, and she scoffed at the realisation that came to her; this was the Muggle-born mistress for whom Theomund had gotten himself temporarily castrated. “Did you enjoy your hospital stay last year, Theomund? Because it’s looking an awful lot like you’ll be there again this Christmas.”

Theomund stopped grinning.

“Must you spoil my fun?”

“Must you call it *fun*?” she retorted.

“I will make up to you with drink. Ja?”

“It’s an open bar.”

“A drink sounds like a brilliant idea. I’ll join you.” Hermione glanced back at Sirius as he added to the McKinnons, “We’ll see you at the table.”

“Your friend?” Theomund inquired, starting towards the steps up to the room’s bordering platform, the silent and smiling Undersecretary to the German Ministry of Magic on his arm.

“Mione and I were in school together for our final year,” Sirius told him. “And you? How do you know her?”

“Like I say to Ida, she is wife of my English cousin. Tavaris Nott — you know?”

“As a result of great misfortune.”

Theomund laughed at that.

“Miserable man,” he chortled. “You should ‘ave seen, my Lady. Until you, Tavi is so miserable — embarrassing.”

“Yes, because out of all of you, Tavaris is the embarrassing one.”

“Ach, why you must be so mean?”

Hermione reached the bar first, securing herself a temporary escape by squeezing into the cramped space between a wizard in a pointed hat and a witch with a green feather in her hair. She signalled to the nearest barman, who bustled over with a squinty frown.

“A glass of elderflower wine, if you would, please.”

“Ogden’s for me,” Sirius said over her shoulder.

The barman nodded shortly and ducked past his partner — a harried-looking barmaid — on his way to retrieve their requests from below the counter. He reappeared a minute later with the two drinks.

The glass was nearly at Hermione’s lips when she smelt it: the dank odour of the Draught of Peace. She stared at the pale, lavender-tinged liquid, and then at the barman, his bland smile, and the robotic way with which he served the next guest.

Barty was smarter than she had given him credit for, arranging for the potion to be given to her so discreetly, but still, she felt ill. Could it be? Was the barman under the Imperius Curse? She glanced down the bar at Theomund and Undersecretary Roth, the latter of whom wore a smile just as bland as she leaned into his side.

“I’m surprised you didn’t go with Superior Red,” Sirius said, after his first sip. “Since your chummy with the Malfoys and all now — *whoa*, all right, then. Thirsty much?”

Hermione set her empty glass back on the counter, coughing and spluttering into her fist, her eyes watering.

“Parched,” she choked. She pressed a hand to her chest for a moment, taking a deep breath. She imagined that she could feel the potion seeping into her bloodstream, making her feel hot, and smiled breathlessly. “Let’s start making our way to the table, shall we?”

“Yeah,” said Sirius, with an odd look. “Let’s.”

With perfect timing, the music was cut. An amplified voice sounded from the direction of the stage, calling for everyone to find their seats.

Only Aisling, Stefan, Walter, and an older couple whom she did not recognise had already arrived by the time Hermione and Sirius reached Table Three. Tavaris, she spotted about five metres away, bidding farewell to a squat witch who was dressed in a vividly pink gown with an excess of frills, and whose mouth was stretched wide like that of a toad that had just caught a particularly delicious fly.

He wound over to them in time to pull out Hermione’s chair.

“Was that who you needed to speak to?” she asked, conscious yet uncaring of her curling upper lip. “*Her*?”

“Dolores Umbridge and I are working on a small project together,” said Tavaris. He looked away from her to nod at those gathered at their table. “McKinnon. Victoria. How are you both this evening?”

“Ready for some solid entertainment,” said the handsome, middle-aged man seated directly opposite them, whose eyes crinkled at the corners with his smile. “If anyone should be able to provide that, it’s the WWN.”

His place card had been turned inwards for the table to read: *Lord L. McKinnon, Head of International Magical Cooperation.*

The woman beside him raised a thin eyebrow, pursing her ruby-red lips. She had a spectacular updo of beach-blonde ringlets and wore pearl earrings larger than any other pair Hermione had seen before. Printed on her own place card was, *Lady V. McKinnon, Editor-in-Chief of Witch Weekly.*

"That is not to say that you didn't do a fine job yourself, love. Our taste is simply diff—"

"Save it, Leon."

While Hermione took her seat, Tavaris remained on his feet, staring off into the distance.

"Is that —?"

"I'm afraid so."

He sighed and manoeuvred himself into the seat on her left, hooking his walking-stick on the back of his chair.

Theomund and Undersecretary Roth joined them a moment later, the former with an unsuccessful attempt to scare Tavaris as he had Hermione.

And then, as the floor emptied and the tables filled, Marlene was there, looking nothing short of glamourous in her amethyst-coloured gown, and since she, unlike Sirius, had been raised to be well-versed in the politics of girlhood, she wrapped her arms around Hermione from behind and squealed, "*Mione*!"

Hermione had never liked this game, but at least she knew how to play it.

"Marlene!" she gasped, jumping to her feet to embrace her. "Oh, my God, I *missed* you!"

"*I missed you*, *too*!" said Marlene emphatically, squeezing her tight. "How dare you run off on me like that! And all for a *man*, too! Merlin, what happened to you?"

Hermione laughed brightly. They each leaned away, still in an embrace, to look one another over.

"You look stunning, as always."

"*Me*? What about *you*? I *love* your dress. Who's it by?"

"Oh, just Twilfitt and Tattings. I remembered what you said about jewel tones —"

"— for the winter season!" exclaimed Marlene, and then they were both dissolving into laughter, releasing each other to catch their breath and wipe at their dry eyes. "We *must* sit together. I'll die if you're not beside me."

Hermione looked back at the table, her eyes darting from seat to seat. “All right, you switch spots with Sirius, and I’ll switch spots with Tavaris.” She moved Tavaris’ walking-stick to her own chair and she and Marlene went about switching the place cards, all the while everyone but Aisling, Mrs McKinnon, and Undersecretary Roth watched them in complete befuddlement.

Up on the stage, the same man from before asked in his amplified voice for everyone to give him their attention. He was young and burly, wearing navy-blue dress robes, and had a cocky grin. With him stood a woman with sleek, black hair who wore a gown with a plunging neckline.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to this year’s annual Yule Gala, brought to you by the Wizarding Wireless Network! I’m Jack Davis, host of *Quick Quidditch*, and this lovely witch beside me is Ruby Lee, whom you may know from her show *Witching Hour*. Together, we make up your emcees for the night.”

“As you know, this year’s gala is being held in honour of the brave witches and wizards from the British Ministry of Magic’s Auror Office,” said Ruby Lee, in her famously sultry voice. “Tonight, you’ll be spoken to by some fine gentlemen —” here, she threw wink at the Minister’s table, and Professor Dumbledore pressed a hand to his cheek as though to contain a blush, “— with more to say on that, but for now, I know you’re all hungry and eager to see what’s in line for the entertainment, so without further ado, allow us to introduce you to four charming young men whom you may not have heard of.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said Jack Davis grandly, “the Weird Sisters!”

At the same time that four newly-of-age men in dragon-hide leather strode onto the stage, the first course appeared on the table: a seafood starter which consisted of scallops and fresh greens drizzled in a lemon-coloured sauce. There was a fluttering of fabric as white cloth napkins were placed in laps.

“Such a shame,” said Mrs McKinnon, as she inspected her plate. “I was looking forward to the caviar.”

“We still have that jar at home, Mum,” Marlene reminded her. “The one Dad brought back from Oslo.”

“This is true,” sighed Mrs McKinnon, and she picked up her smallest fork.

Hermione looked at her own silver cutlery, taking particular pleasure in the presence of more than one knife. The silver felt strange in her hand; more than once, she fumbled.

Meanwhile, the Weird Sisters started up their first song of the evening. Their band was smaller than she knew it to be, and she guessed that they had not yet recruited all the members they would one day have. By the third verse of *This Is the Night*, numerous members of their audience were gaping up at the stage. It was immediately apparent that most of the guests did not hold favourable opinions regarding rock and roll.

“These blokes are all right,” Sirius decided by the fourth verse. “What are they called again?”

“The Weird Sisters,” said Hermione.

“So, Mione,” Marlene began, turning her head to look at her as she picked up her drink — a pink and fizzy something. “I want answers. Tell me everything.”

“Goodness, I don’t even know where to start.” Hermione thought for a moment before continuing. “Tavaris and I didn’t actually meet in person until after graduation. We exchanged letters for the better part of a year, which is how I got to know him.”

“*Mione*! Why didn’t you tell us?” gasped Marlene, in exaggerated outrage. “All that time, and you never said anything!”

“I suppose I just wanted to keep it to myself, honestly. It was special, and new, and exciting, and I wasn’t ready to share it, you know? I also worried about what everyone would think — in case you haven’t noticed,” Hermione added, leaning in and dropping her voice, “he’s a bit on the older side.”

“Thank you for that, darling,” said Tavaris, while Marlene giggled into her drink.

“Oh, hush, you know I adore you.”

“Do you?” Marlene’s smiled was too fixed, her gaze too focused. “Is that why you got married so quickly?”

“Partly,” said Hermione slowly. “But really, I just … I wanted to have a family again. And now I do.”

“I saw the announcement when it hit the paper last year. Don’t get me started on how cross I am with you that I had to hear it from the *Prophet*. Would it have been so hard to pick up a quill and write? You could’ve just said, ‘*Dear Marlene, I had a baby, With love, Mione*,’ and I’d have been happy.”

“I barely had the energy to bathe, let alone pick up a quill. Have you ever been near a new-born, Marlene?”

“My nephew, Finley. I remember perfectly well how out of sorts Walter and Aisling were when he was born. I’d bet more than a lot of gold that I caught Walter sleepwalking once or twice —”

“You did not!” said Walter indignantly —

“— but our house-elves stepped in all the time to let them get some rest —”

“Oh, honey, you did,” smirked Aisling —

“— and you can’t tell me that you don’t have a couple of them yourself.”

While Hermione tried to think of another explanation, Tavaris spoke up.

“Mione prefers to do most of the minding herself. More than a few times, she and one of our elves have gotten into an argument — yes, Victoria, I know it’s hard to believe but they do have it in them — about whose job it was to — ah, but we’re eating, so I cannot tell this story.”

Laughter rang from the half of the round table on which the older generation sat.

The Weird Sisters were playing *Magic Works* now, a song to which Hermione had once shared a dance with Viktor Krum, before her night had promptly been ruined by the fact that it was him with whom she had, and not Ron.

“I thought you’d planned to work at Hogwarts,” Sirius said. “What happened to that?”

“I turned it down. While I’m positive I would have loved the apprenticeship — it would have been a wonderful learning experience if nothing else — like I said, all I really wanted was a home, and although Hogwarts is one, it’s not mine.” She smiled sadly.

Sirius appeared unconvinced. “Right,” he said, picking up his half-empty glass of firewhiskey. “That brings me to my next question. During you and Nott’s correspondence, did it ever cross your mind that — if not all of us — you should at least tell Remus? That’s Remus Lupin, by the way, in case you’ve forgotten.” He rotated the tumbler in his hand, the amber liquid swirling and the rocks knocking about.

The smile melted off Hermione’s face. She felt as though her whole being had gone still. Her entire focus narrowed down to the *clinking* of the ice.

“I haven’t forgotten,” she whispered.

“No? What about that boyfriend of yours, whose ring you wore round your neck? You know, the *Muggle*.”

“Sirius,” said Aisling. *You’re being too obvious*, she was telling him.

“I still miss him,” said Hermione, at length. “I’ll always miss him. But I needed to consider my future, and that meant …”

Clink, *clink*.

Her forearm itched faintly. A hand came to rest on her knee beneath the tablecloth. Her eyes did not tear themselves away from the stirring firewhiskey, but rather, they drifted.

“Let us speak about something else,” said Tavaris.

She nodded weakly and took a large gulp from her water goblet; it washed down her throat coolly, awakening her to the other sounds which filled the massive Hall of Portraits. Sirius returned his drink to the table, firewhiskey drained, the ice beginning to melt.

Tavaris took the initiative to bring forth a new discussion, one about the potions trade. This turned out to be a subject of great interest to many, especially Theomund and Mr McKinnon, who seemed to know each other unexpectedly well.

"… Potions Association is not making this job so easy. Costs, they are rising. British currency is already higher, now some deem it *too* high. If this goes on, Leon, I am fearing you face risk of recession."

"As do I, Theomund. As do I," said Mr McKinnon heavily. He took a sip of his drink, another lowball tumbler, and sighed. "Several formal complaints have found their way to my desk. I imagine the E.P.T.D. has received their fair share as well."

"That is big understatement, my friend."

"Our own 'Ead of International Affairs is having same troubles," Undersecretary Roth put in. "Minister Schulz is being attacked by press as well, all questions about why bursting mushrooms are suddenly so expensive."

"Theomund and I have recently discussed covering a portion of the costs ourselves," said Tavaris, after swallowing his last scallop. He set his fork down at a neat four-o'clock angle. "For a short period of time, that is. Just until the market manages to balance itself out." He spoke as if the E.P.T.D. was under their direct oversight.

That was when Hermione noticed the writing on Theomund's place card: *Mr T. Nott, Director of the European Potions Trade and Distribution Company.*

On the stage, another song reached its end. The Weird Sisters were conversing outside the bounds of the Sonorous Charm, their lead guitarist, Kirley Duke, moving to occupy the piano instead, and their drummer, Orsino Thruston, pointing out chords to their bass player, Donaghan Tremlett. All four musicians appeared inexplicably nervous as they resettled and the lead singer, Myron Wagtail, faced the audience once more.

It commenced with the piano, a gentle, carrying melody. Hermione's lips parted, and she stared up at the stage in disbelief.

Then Wagtail began to sing:

"*Imagine there's no heaven*

It's easy if you try

No hell below us

Above us, only sky

Imagine all the people

Living for today

I..."

Sirius' head, too, turned, as well as Stefan McKinnon's.

"Imagine there's no countries

It isn't hard to do

Nothing to kill or die for

And no religion too

Imagine all the people

Living life in peace

You…"

All around, voices quieted, and cutlery was set aside. The music swelled, enveloping the Hall, so painfully felt by so many.

"*You may say I'm a dreamer*

But I'm not the only one

I hope someday you'll join us

And the world will be as one…"

It was a true sign of the times that this song, unknown to the greater audience, had the power to silence everyone.

By the end of it, Professor Dumbledore was distinctly glassy-eyed, and several tables away, Molly Weasley was dabbing her face with her napkin. Hermione stood up, clapping. Sirius and Stefan followed suit. Soon enough, half the Hall was on their feet.

With profound courage, Wagtail said, "That was *Imagine* by John Lennon. A Muggle."

The applause stuttered and fizzled out in some places. Whispers broke out, and more than one person retook their seat, including the Blacks and the Malfoys at Table Six behind them. Hermione was certain that Tavaris would have been among their number had he stood in the first place.

She clapped extra hard before retaking her seat. Sirius even whistled. As the Weird Sisters strode off and Jack Davis and Ruby Lee returned, they looked at each other with a new frankness.

And Hermione could see then that, beneath the suspicion, the anger, and the hurt, the strongest emotion in their midst was confusion. Whatever information the Order had gathered and whatever rumours they had heard, it was all contradicted by her behaviour, by the fact that she remained undeniably, at her core, the person they knew, leaving the biggest question of all unanswerable — *why?*

Barty Crouch Sr took to the stage next, and the murmuring came to an eventual halt. The nettled and outraged looks, however, lingered throughout his speech.

“As you well know, these past years, our world has survived under threat,” Crouch said, in his usual grave and no-nonsense manner. “This threat, which has been kept at bay in large part due to our Aurors, who have put and continue to put their lives at risk every day for *your* benefit — for *your* security. Too many lives have been lost. He Who Must Not Be Named will not go away on his own — he will not leave us be — not unless we fight! And that is precisely what your Aurors do for you.

“So now, I must urge you all, most forwardly and fervently, to donate whatever funds you reasonably can to help support the Auror Office — *to help support your fighters*. You will see that a table has been set up in the corner —” waving curtly, he drew attention to the bottom-right point of the room, halfway between the entrance and the bar, “— for you to visit at your own discretion at any time during the performances throughout the night. Know that any contributions you ultimately make shan’t be for naught. You will get that money back; it is *your* protection that you are funding, *your* welfare and the welfare of *your* families that you are contributing to, and I ask that you bear that in mind when making your donations.

“Thank you.”

The first course vanished as he returned to Table One, swiftly replaced by the second: a creamy chicken and potato gratin. The string quartet struck up again, and there was a collective hum of appreciation upon the first bite, which came with the discovery of added truffle.

Walter and Mr McKinnon began to wonder aloud why Crouch had not run for Minister that past election, as had been his unspoken plans. Little did they know, he had tried to, only to have his son intercept his submission to the running.

“All right,” Tavaris said abruptly, after washing down his first couple of bites with champagne. He reached into his dress robes and pulled out his chequebook. “Time for some fun.”

Mrs McKinnon gave a delicate, closed-lip laugh.

“I think he’s spotted you,” she said, her eyes on Table Six as he flipped open the pocket-sized book. “Yes, he’s getting it out … Standing up now …”

Tavaris tore out a slip of paper and passed it to Hermione.

“Take this to submit for me, will you?”

Curious, she glimpsed at the number on the cheque.

“Am I reading this correctly?”

“Yes, darling, you are.”

“Right. Very well, then.” Hermione stood from her chair. “If you’ll please excuse —”

“I’ll come,” said Sirius, standing as well.

“Marlene, sweetheart,” said Mr McKinnon, tearing a slip of paper from his own chequebook, “go with them.”

And so, it was while linking arms with both Sirius and Marlene that Hermione went to make the donation.

“You know, Mione, I was wondering — what happened to your old wand?”

“Pardon me?”

“Your old wand. It was vine, wasn’t it? Looked like it, anyway. Yet the wand you’re registered with is cedar, and you’ve apparently had it for a decade.” Marlene batted her eyelashes innocently. “Care to explain?”

Hermione’s brain was not moving very fast just then, and she found that she could not.

“No? I’ll skip to the next question, then. How come you haven’t written? Excluding those first letters to Remus and Dumbledore, of course. We’ve written you plenty, and all our letters have gone unanswered.”

“I … am not the greatest at managing my post. I’m sorry, it was not my intention to leave you without a reply.”

“Was it someone else’s, then?” asked Sirius.

She could not answer that, either.

“I’m not sure what you’re implying.”

“In that case, let’s drop the pretences,” said Marlene breezily, as they stepped up onto the platform together. “Have you been managing your own post, and have therefore deliberately ignored our letters, or have they been kept from you, effectively cutting off your contact with the outside world?”

Hermione floundered, entirely unprepared for an approach so direct. “Just be yourself,” she had been instructed, and that was what she was trying to do. But what now?

She caught sight of Abraxas, who had beaten them to the table in the corner, where donations were being submitted to two young wizards, one of them Barty Jr. So quickly that one could have blinked and missed it, Abraxas’ eyes darted from Sirius to Marlene, and then he was striding over to meet them.

“All right, Mione, let’s see it,” he said, nodding to the cheque in her hand. “What has the bastard gone and written?”

Hermione slipped her arm out from Marlene’s to show him. Abraxas squinted at the number, and promptly scowled.

“That dirty son of a bitch,” he muttered. “Not playing fair tonight, is he? *Well* …” He whipped out his chequebook and snapped at Barty to get him a quill. As he proceeded to

scribble out a new number, Barty took Tavaris' cheque to slip through the slot at the top of a large box on the centre of the table.

His eyes widened when he caught a glimpse.

"This is incredibly generous of you and your husband, Lady Nott," he said, grinning up at her. "I hope you treat yourself by taking advantage of the open bar. You certainly deserve it."

"Thank you, Barty," she said, with a pointed look. "I shouldn't be congratulated, though. Really, it's the Auror Office who deserves our thanks. And you and the others who've helped organise this."

"We do our best," said Barty humbly, before accepting the donations from both Sirius and the McKinnons with a smile. One had to wonder just how much of the proceeds would end up with the Aurors.

"There!" Abraxas said, slamming another cheque down on the table; the long line of digits was practically eye-watering to read. "We shall see what he makes of *that*." Smirking, he turned back to Hermione. "Let's get that celebratory drink."

Even once they had reached the bar, Sirius had still not relinquished his hold on her arm. Marlene kept to her other side, effectively caging her in.

"I'm not interested in having more to drink, actually. But please, do still order yourselves something."

"It doesn't have to have any alcohol in it," dismissed Sirius, as the same barman from before came over to take their orders. "Another firewhiskey for me, a Daisyroot Draught for the beautiful blonde on my right and your finest glass of Superior Red for the peacock-looking one on my left —" Abraxas puffed up, feathers distinctly ruffled, "— and what would you like, Mione?"

"An elderflower lemonade, please," Hermione told the barman. "*Just* an elderflower lemonade."

Unfortunately, her message did not deliver; when she received her next drink, she at once caught a whiff of the same dankness from her first one. Without an excuse to do otherwise, she began drinking it in small increments.

Abraxas twirled his glass of wine, inspecting it as he angled his body to face Sirius. "When you were a small child," he began, in a conversational tone, "we found your wit amusing. 'He has a clever tongue,' your father would say, 'and once he's learnt how to wield it, a valuable weapon it shall be.'"

Sirius stood up straighter.

"But you never *did* learn, did you? You remain careless with your words, lacking even the weakest sense of caution." Abraxas moved half a step closer, a certain darkness peeking out from behind his pale facade. "Soon, Mr Black, the consequences of your clever tongue will

catch up to you … Soon, you will awaken to find that this so-called weapon has been plunged into your chest without it ever having left your hand."

"I hadn't thought you so bold as to dole out threats with so many Aurors about," said Sirius, after a second. On Hermione's other side, Marlene had dropped her hand to graze against her thigh.

"You misunderstand," said Abraxas, with the gentleness of powdered snow. "I am not threatening you, merely educating. You may consider it a favour to your late father."

A few feet down the bar, Lyall Lupin was watching their interaction through tired eyes. The depth of the purpleness beneath them suggested that they had been tired for a very long time. It prodded Hermione into remembering that his wife had died some time that year; "from that wretched thing they call cancer," Andromeda had once said.

Had he locked Remus up for the night before coming here? Or had he now been spending full moons wondering where his son was, and when he might be coming home?

Hermione took a slightly larger sip of her spiked lemonade. When Mr Lupin's eyes fell on her, she looked away.

"Lord Malfoy," said a simpering voice. "Just the gentleman I wanted to speak to."

Evidently, nowhere was safe to look.

"Madam Umbridge," Abraxas said, ending the staring contest between Sirius and himself. "How do you do this evening?"

"You flatter me by asking," said Dolores Umbridge, with a girlish giggle that was extremely offensive to Hermione's ears. "Aside from that opening performance — just ghastly, don't you agree — yes, I thought you might — this evening has been a true delight. Highly productive, too, I might add."

"Productive, you say? They do allow for it, these events."

"I'm glad you agree. As it so happens, I was sought out by Lord Nott earlier —"

"Indeed? By great coincidence, I have Lady Nott with me right now. I don't believe the two of you are acquainted."

"Nor do I wish us to be," said Hermione bluntly.

Umbridge's face coloured to match her dress.

"I beg your pardon if I have done something to offend you, Lady Nott. Only, I cannot see how I have done. Might you be so kind as to clue me in?" She tittered nervously.

Hermione looked down her nose at her.

“I do not agree with Madam Umbridge’s politics,” she said. “I suspect becoming an acquaintance of hers would be a highly unpleasant experience, and it is one I shall not subject myself to.”

“Your husband sought me out to discuss —” Umbridge started, with a tremulous smile, before being cut off.

“Why is she still speaking to me, Abraxas?”

Sirius’ eyebrows shot up, meanwhile Marlene’s furrowed.

“I believe she is attempting to reason with you,” said Abraxas, his eyes glinting with amusement.

Hermione wrinkled her nose. She then addressed Sirius and Marlene. “Let’s go back to our table so she needn’t waste any more of her breath.”

“That would be the polite thing to do,” said Marlene.

“Sirius Black,” said Sirius, with a nod to Umbridge. “It’s been an absolute displeasure being within your vicinity.”

The three of them left Umbridge with her mouth hanging open and her face a far deeper shade of pink than her attire. Abraxas, thankfully, bid her farewell, too, and trailed them all the way back across the Hall, so no further questions could be asked.

The next performance was announced soon after Hermione, Sirius, and Marlene had returned to Table Three. This time, it was a name currently well-known. The crowd did not go wild, for this was not that sort of crowd, but they did clap most excitedly, and from Table Eleven — where the Longbottoms, the Prewetts, and the Weasleys all sat — there was even an exceptionally loud gasp.

A shapely, dark-skinned witch in a gown that hugged her every curve took to the stage with mighty confidence. She greeted the audience with a dazzling smile, and once the applause died down, began to sing, in her deep, velvety voice, *A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love*.

“Excellent. This is much more tasteful.”

“I don’t know,” Marlene said slyly, as she sliced herself off a bite of chicken, “I thought that last group was pretty cool.”

“Do not antagonise me, Marlene Evelyn,” said Mrs McKinnon, giving her daughter a stern look. “I take no issue with their decision to include a song by a non-magical artist, do not imply that I do. It is the *style* of the group that I take issue with; they are not right for this audience, nor an event of this kind at all, and the WWN should have recognised that.”

“That last group was pretty cool,” repeated Stefan.

She scoffed, turning her attention away from her two youngest children. Marlene and Stefan both snickered.

“They were making a statement,” said Aisling smartly, over the brim of her tumbler. “A dangerous one, I grant you, but a powerful one, nonetheless.” She took a sip. “Those boys should be proud of themselves. Most people would be too afraid to make a statement so bold. Although, this does not necessarily mean they lack courage; sometimes, there is simply not enough left to expend.”

Hermione decided then that she liked Aisling McKinnon.

“I agree,” she told Aisling, but when she opened her mouth to expand on this, she was overtaken by a force which washed away the words that had been on the tip of her tongue only a second before. The conversation dimmed, her mind was wiped clean of all thought, and her body seemed to sink into the chair, her chest deflating with a long, even exhale.

And then, she felt only peace.

Aisling was still speaking, Walter now contributing his own thoughts on the matter. Sirius was whispering into Marlene’s ear, his eyes on Hermione. On the other side of the table, the words “Muggles,” “cold,” and “wall” kept cropping up. Undersecretary Roth sighed while Theomund grumbled and Tavaris and Mr McKinnon shook their heads in exasperation.

When Hermione dragged her gaze back to Aisling, she found her silent, her head tilted back to look up. The sounds came rushing back at the same time that a hush swept over the table.

“She doesn’t wish to speak to you,” Walter said coldly. “I suggest you leave her alone. If not for her sake, then for your own.”

“Now, now, Walter. Is it so wrong for a brother to want to check in on his sister? After all, it’s been quite a while since I last had the chance.”

“And whose fault is that?” said Aisling, in a steely voice.

“There, Ash, our opinions differ.”

“They differ on a lot of things.”

Mr McKinnon now looked decidedly unfriendly. “I believe you were asked to leave, Mr —”

“Eamon.”

Eamon Travers glanced up, and immediately went rigid.

“Go back to your table,” said Hermione calmly.

His hands clenched on the back of Aisling’s chair so tightly that his knuckles turned white. But after a moment in which he visibly struggled to restrain himself, he stepped back and, without argument, away.

The colour drained from both Sirius’ and Marlene’s faces. Together, they stared at Hermione as if they had just now noticed she was sat beside them. Stefan leaned over to whisper to Sirius, who nodded at whatever he said. The table was quiet still. It seemed an uneasy

silence, although Hermione could not pinpoint why that was. She had done the right thing, had she not? She had made him go away.

“I’m surprised he listened to you,” said Marlene at last. “He’s usually harder to shake off.”

“Yes. Thank you, Lady Nott,” said Aisling stiffly, reaching for her drink again.

Hermione smiled faintly at her and picked up her fork to start on her cooling chicken. She did not immediately remember to use her knife.

Their next course — a honeyed winter salad — arrived in the middle of Warbeck’s *My Baby Gave Me a Hippogriff for Christmas*. Hermione was already teetering towards fullness, despite the small portions. She watched Mrs McKinnon study her own plate as if calculating the calories of the dressing.

Just then, a harsh, bitter scent reached Hermione’s nose, making it scrunch up. She twisted slowly to look back at Table Six, where Pollux had taken out his pipe and was now exhaling a smoky mist of tobacco. Over at Table Four, Creighton Rosier and his brother-in-law, the Director of the French Bureau of Magical Affairs, François Durand, were emitting their own clouds of white. It was yet another reminder that this was the ‘80s, a time when there wasn’t a place one couldn’t smoke, even in the wizarding world.

Before she knew it, Sirius had a cigarette between his lips and was passing a second to Stefan.

“Don’t smoke at the table, please,” she implored gently. “You know how terrible the effects are, even second-hand.”

Theomund sniggered.

“Lady Mione dislikes the smell of tobacco,” he told Mr McKinnon. “Tavaris does not allow smoking in the house since she is arriving. We can smoke outside only, and just where she cannot see through windows.”

“You quit after you were married, then, did you?” Mr McKinnon asked Tavaris, amused.

“He is smoking on occasion still,” chortled Theomund, “but only when his wife is not there to see.”

Tavaris set down his cutlery with a steadiness that implied he would have rather thrown it.

“You smoke?” said Hermione blankly.

“You mentioned to me once that a … friend of yours does.”

She hadn’t.

“You expressed your distaste for his habit,” said Tavaris, “so, naturally, I pretended not to share it.”

“You’ve never smoked near Theodore, have you?”

“I have not.”

“Well, then …” Hermione felt herself shrug. “All right.”

Sirius chose that moment to light up; he and Stefan proceeded to clog the air between them. Shaking his head, Walter Conjured them an ash tray. When Marlene tried to take a cigarette for herself, he slapped her hand away.

“It’s Remus,” said Sirius, after a minute, as Warbeck informed them all sadly that her next song would be her last of the night. “This *friend* of yours who smokes. I can’t imagine your husband would hesitate to give *me* a title so platonic.”

“I am referring to the Lupin boy, yes,” admitted Tavaris.

“Boy?” said Marlene. “He’s the same age as your wife. Shouldn’t you consider him a man, if you consider her a woman?” She furrowed her brows in an expression of innocent confusion. “Unless you don’t; unless you see her as a girl, in which case —”

“Marlene,” interjected her father, in a warning voice.

“I don’t believe I’ve heard this song before,” said her mother abruptly, in an overt attempt to change the subject.

“I don’t believe I have either,” said Hermione indifferently, listening closely to the opening notes. Only when the lyrics were given a voice did she recognise what song Warbeck was performing.

“*At first I was afraid, I was petrified*…”

“Oh, my God. This is Gloria Gaynor.”

“Who?”

“I like this song,” she told Tavaris. “It always made my mother want to dance.”

He clasped her hand over the table, never once breaking eye-contact with Sirius, who was looking angrier by the second.

“It seems to me like a fine song, darling.”

She smiled, or she thought she did. She could not quite feel her face anymore.

“*Go on now, go, walk out the door*

Just turn around now, ‘cause you’re not welcome anymore

Weren’t you the one who tried to hurt me with goodbye?

Did you think I’d crumble? Did you think I’d lay down and die?”

Marlene was drumming her silver-painted nails on the table, a ring glinting on nearly every finger. She, too, looked angry.

"Lily has played this song before," she said. "It's sung by a Muggle. I suppose your mother learnt it from all those years your family spent living alongside them."

"That's right," said Hermione easily. "It's a good song to dance to."

Marlene scoffed under her breath.

"What point are you attempting to make, Miss McKinnon?"

"I just find it ironic, is all."

"Sweetheart, please," said Mr McKinnon, sounding as though he were apologising. "Let it rest."

"*It took all the strength I had not to fall apart*

Just tryin' hard to mend the pieces of my broken heart

And I spent oh so many nights just feelin' sorry for myself

I used to cry, but now I hold my head up high…"

Marlene dropped her napkin on the table and stood.

"It's done, Marlene," said Walter seriously. "Give up."

"*And you see me, somebody new*

I'm not that chained up little person still in love with you…"

"I need to visit the ladies' room. Coming, Mione?"

Tavaris nodded at Hermione. He squeezed her hand and released it, allowing her to rise. The blood rushed to her head, and she had to wait a couple of seconds for the dizziness to abate before she was able to safely follow Marlene from the Hall, past the portrait of Podric Batworthy, Grand Sorcerer, and through a set of open doors to the right of the stage.

The music carried out into the wide corridor they walked, heard right up until the point that Marlene side-stepped a white-haired house-elf with a bowl of mint humbugs, wrenched open the door to the ladies' lavatory, herded Hermione inside, and pulled it shut again. Without moving from her spot blocking the exit, she ducked low to peek under the row of stalls, then drew up the skirt of her dress and retrieved her wand from a black garter belt.

The first thing she did was cast a Muffling Charm. The second was lock the door.

Hermione had just enough faculties left to know that this was very, very bad. She took several steps back, the *clicks* of her heels on the white marble echoing in the cool emptiness

of the room. Marlene's wand was half-raised at her side, her face set with grim determination.

"You're going to tell me the truth now."

"The truth about what?" Hermione stalled.

"Stop acting like you don't know what we're talking about."

"But I don't —"

"*You made Eamon go away*!" Marlene sucked in a large breath, and suddenly looked apoplectic with rage. "You told him to leave and he treated it like a command. Why would he do that, Mione?"

Hermione looked away from her only to find herself gazing at their reflection in a gilded mirror that stretched the length of the wall on her right. On the gleaming marble countertop, next to a basket of violet hand towels, was a framed, colourless photograph of Hogwarts Castle.

"I have a letter for Sirius," she said impulsively. "It's not with me now."

"Of course, it's not."

"I hadn't expected to see him tonight. Besides, I had nowhere to hide it."

"Don't lie. You were the one who taught me the trick with the garter belt."

"That trick stopped working for me about a year ago." She looked back at Marlene in time to see it dawn on her.

"Lily's letter."

"I never read it."

Marlene made a move to run her fingers through her hair, stopping herself at the last second when she seemed to remember it was done, the curls which typically framed her face pinned back behind her ears. She spat a curse.

"You were with You-Know-Who that night," she said. "You left with him."

"Who told you that?" asked Hermione, in a hushed voice.

"Who do you think?" snapped Marlene, her face hardening. "It was the same person who delivered that letter to you to begin with! The same person who had us questioning everything we thought we knew about you — who told me what everyone's been saying about your son!"

Silence swallowed the lavatory. Hermione stood still at the centre of it, dumbstruck.

"That's how it began?" she said finally. "With you and Morgan Travers?"

“The rumour about your son? No. It began with you leaving the celebration of his birth with a wizard who is not your husband. You-Know-Who returned an hour later. You never did. You understand how that looks, don’t you?”

She did now.

“He has a soft spot for you, according to what Lady Morgan’s heard,” Marlene continued jerkily. “Apparently, you stabbed a Death Eater, and he didn’t even punish you for it. Instead, you were put on *bed rest* due to concerns that you were *harming your pregnancy*. You-Know-Who doesn’t care about other people’s children, he’s made that perfectly clear, so why, Mione, would he care about yours?”

“That’s not what … It was Tavaris who …” Hermione did not know what she was allowed to reveal.

“*How* you wound up with Nott, Lady Morgan doesn’t know.” Marlene crossed her arms over her chest, still clutching her wand. She smiled meanly, without humour. “I really should congratulate you on that, by the way — you gave us quite the shock. Hungover from hitting the pubs, from celebrating graduation, Lily, Mary, and I piled up in bed, Sirius locked in the toilet, Peter half-dead on the rug, James still hammered and up having breakfast with his parents, and in comes Remus, white and shaking, with a letter.”

The bones that supported Hermione’s legs felt as though they were slowly liquifying; she moved clumsily to lower herself onto the indigo ottoman at the far end of the room. It seemed like a good place for a nap, and she stowed this observation away in case she later needed one. Although, to nap in the toilets would probably be unwise. Not exactly socially appropriate, she thought.

Marlene was growing more heated with every sentence that went without a response. “At first, we didn’t all understand. Then Remus told us his father had said he wouldn’t be surprised if Nott turned out to be involved with the Death Eaters based on his politics alone. Mr Potter agreed. Sirius, too, and he *knew* Nott. So,” she said, taking a prowling step closer, “terrified, believing that you must have been kidnapped from Hogwarts by one of the parents who’d attended the ceremony, we reached out to Dumbledore. As it turned out, he’d gotten a letter, too.

“About a week later, he shared his own suspicions. Apparently, your husband was at Hogwarts with You-Know-Who. They shared a dormitory, even appeared to be *friends*. Dumbledore had a different theory than us, though. He admitted that the probability of you having been kidnapped was high, but he also said, ‘Fear makes good people do terrible things.’ What we’ve been wondering for the last two and a half years is, were you taken against your will, or were you acting out of fear? Or, best of all, are you just a really good liar?”

Hermione attempted to concentrate, resulting in her eyes going out of focus and the figure of Marlene blurring at the edges. She squeezed them shut and opened them again to stare at the floor. It had an exceptional shine to it.

“If I answer,” she said, “where will my answer go? Will you repeat it at the next meeting of the Order?”

Marlene did not reply, which likely meant that was exactly where her answer would go.

“I don’t know if you’ve worked it out yet, but there is one among you who will take that answer and deliver it someplace else.”

“There’s a spy, yeah, we know,” she said hotly. “I’m not daft enough to shout any information you may give me at the whole fucking room.”

She appeared to war with herself for a minute, breathing harshly, then crossed the lavatory to sit beside Hermione. She took a purposeful breath.

“I would tell Dumbledore, first off. Lily and Remus, of course, and Sirius, James, and Peter, Alice and Frank as well, and if she lets me, I’d also tell Mary. Those are the people who truly need it. More than that, they deserve it. *We* deserve it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No. *No*, I’d only tell them. Only them, Mione.”

“I’m so sorry, Marlene,” said Hermione softly, lifting her head to meet her gaze, “but I can’t answer your question. I can’t tell you anything.”

Marlene’s eyes became a glistening, watery blue. “But you *can*,” she insisted, her voice nearly breaking. She seized Hermione’s hand so tightly that her fingers went white, although she couldn’t feel it much. “If there’s help to be given, we can give it. If you want out, we can get you out. *Please* … just give us an answer.”

“I’m sorry,” said Hermione again.

Marlene tossed her hand aside and got up. With her back turned, she wiped roughly at her face.

“Fuck you, Mione,” she said, in a tearful voice.

Hermione only sighed, flexing her fingers.

The doorknob rattled.

“*We’re only trying to fucking help*!” Marlene yelled, whirling back round. “What the hell is the matter with you that you don’t even care?”

Hermione barely resisted the urge to cover her ears. Could she not express her anger a little quieter?

“*For Merlin’s sake*, we thought we fucking knew you! I don’t even recognise the person sitting in front of me! You act like you’re completely indifferent, just some cold-hearted bitch who only cares about herself!”

Someone rapped on the door urgently.

“Do any of us matter to you now? Have we ever mattered? I don’t even care what the answer is anymore! We’re all going to die wondering at this point so just say it already! *Say it*, Mione — *SAY WE DON’T MATTER*!”

“Whoever is in there had best not be doing anything untoward!” said a shrill voice on the other side of the door. “If you don’t open this door in the next minute, I shall have no choice but to notify an Auror!”

“Just a second, Muriel!” Hermione called back, without thinking. “Oh, right. She can’t hear me.” Tonelessly, she added, “You should probably unlock the door now.”

Marlene stared, looking furious, shaken, and crestfallen all at once. Her hands fell limply to her sides, as did her wand.

“Is that it, then?” she asked. “You’re really just going to leave it at this?”

Hermione gave the most honest answer she could.

“Your peace of mind is not worth the life of my son.”

“Marlene, open the door,” said another voice.

“We could get him out, too,” said Marlene, giving it one last shot. “We can bring you both someplace safe, where You-Know-Who would never find you.”

“No,” said Hermione simply. “You can’t.”

The lock turned with a *click*; Aisling was the first one through the door, quickly followed by Narcissa and Great-Aunt Muriel. Wasting no time, Aisling hurried over to Marlene to search her for some sign of injury, then grasped her face to draw her thumbs under her eyes, wiping away her tears. Narcissa approached Hermione to do the same. When she looked into Hermione’s eyes, however, she found them dry — and something else that made her stiffen in alarm.

“Now I see why the door was locked,” Great-Aunt Muriel said, looking at Marlene reprovingly. “My dear Miss McKinnon, you are far too pretty to be crying in the toilets.”

Narcissa helped Hermione up and silently ushered her past the other three and out into the corridor. Feeling somewhat adventurous, Hermione took a mint humbug from the house-elf and popped it in her mouth.

“This doesn’t taste very nice,” she said blandly, forcing herself to swallow. “Now I remember why I avoid them.”

“Restrain yourself,” Narcissa whispered snappishly. “The night is not yet over. You cannot afford any more slip-ups.”

“When did I slip up?” asked Hermione, in bewilderment. Before Narcissa could fill her in, however, something else stole her attention. “Why, hello, Professor!”

“Good evening, Lady Mione. It has been quite some time. I hope that you have been well?”

“As well as I can be, I suppose.”

“I believe that is what counts.” Professor Dumbledore smiled softly as he stopped before them. Meeting her gaze, he had not even the barest hint of twinkling behind his half-moon spectacles. Instead, his eyes widened slightly, and his smile became full of sorrow. “Nevertheless, one cannot help but hope for the best, even if that hope is baseless.”

“I beg your pardon, Professor Dumbledore,” Narcissa cut in, coolly polite, “but we have been away from our tables far too long. If you would excuse us …”

“Of course,” said Professor Dumbledore. “My apologies for keeping you, Madam Malfoy.” He nodded to them both, but before they parted, he continued deeply. “I am glad to have spoken with you, Lady Mione, if only for a short period of time. I hope the best for your future.”

Even if that hope is baseless, Hermione finished in her head, as Narcissa led her away from him and back into the Hall of Portraits. She was helped back into her chair just as Jack Davis and Ruby Lee returned to the stage again and Aisling returned to the table with Marlene, whose eyes were now red and swollen. At once, Sirius sent Hermione an accusatory look.

“You two missed Dumbledore’s speech,” said Walter.

“And nearly the savoury course,” said Stefan.

“And now, for our final performance of the night …”

Narcissa leaned down and whispered inaudibly to Tavaris. She then left as quietly as she had come.

There was a smattering of cheers and applause, the majority of which came from the older members of the audience, as the wizarding classical singer Madam Bletchley, in her pearly-white gown, sashayed onto the stage, accompanied by the string quartet. Conversation resumed as they began their set.

“… mountains of appeals that the High Court have been withholding. I’ve sent a representative to Ontario to reason with them, but the problem is, they don’t trust that our government hasn’t been intercepted by You-Know-Who’s people.” At this, Mr McKinnon’s gaze lingered on Tavaris, who pretended not to pick up on the casual accusation.

“The Canadians had trust enough to send over a handful of Aurors,” he pointed out distractedly, as he tilted Hermione’s face towards himself. “You’ve some lipstick, darling, just here …” He wiped at the corner of her lips with his thumb, then glanced up at her eyes. His own lips parted on a silent curse.

“All of whom have yet to return home,” said Mr McKinnon. “And you mustn’t forget, Nott, they sent us another Auror back in ‘sixty-eight due to the questions that cropped up surrounding the death of Nobby Leach, and we all know what happened to *her*.”

“Poor woman. It was just devastating,” said Mrs McKinnon heavily. “And her daughter, too … I feel ill just thinking about it.”

“What has happened to this Auror, can I ask?”

“She was one of the first to go, Madam Roth; the first Auror serving the British Ministry of Magic’s Auror Office to be attacked by Death Eaters in her own home. She was not the only one home, though. Her daughter was no older than six, and they got her, too.”

“Are you having any clue about the motivation behind this attack?” asked Undersecretary Roth, frowning deeply. “Was it a message to the Canadian Parliament of Magic?”

“More to do with her husband, I think,” Mr McKinnon informed her grimly. “He’s an Auror himself, you see, and that night, while she agreed to stay back with their daughter, he answered a call to deal with another attack believed to be taking place elsewhere, on account of an anonymous tip.”

“There was no such attack, however,” added Walter; “the Death Eaters merely wanted him out of the house.”

Theomund grunted in understanding.

Mrs McKinnon dabbed the corners of her mouth with her napkin, then refolded it on her lap. “With every year that this war drags on,” she sighed, “I become further convinced that Alastor Moody has the most profoundly rotten luck.”

Sirius snorted in mirthless scepticism.

“I doubt luck has anything to do with it,” he said, and then, glaring over Marlene’s bowed head, he added coldly, “isn’t that right, Lady Nott?”

Hermione dropped her gaze to her plate.

“I believe that constant vigilance is an impossible feat,” she murmured absently, “and as to those who regularly achieve the impossible, their vigilance still cannot prevent the inevitable.” She selected a hot pepper stuffed with feta before the plates vanished, and it tasted superb. “That is terribly upsetting, though, please extend my condolences to Auror Moody when you see him. Tavaris, what type of pepper is this?”

Soon, they were served pudding. On a small plate in front of her, she now had an outrageously garnished slice of cheesecake. She put her fork on the plate and did not bother to eat it. She still had half a feta-stuffed Romano pepper that she was savouring.

The people around her kept speaking, but she paid them little mind. They were going too fast for her to jump in, anyway, and the topics they spoke of were extremely disheartening. More

than once throughout Madam Bletchley's set, Tavaris slid her water goblet closer to her, prompting her to drink from it.

And then came the very last song of the night, reaching her ears as though through the parting of a great fog.

"*Can you hear the drums, Fernando?*

I remember, long ago, another starry night like this…"

Marlene raised her head to look at Hermione. Her expression quickly became venomous.

"Don't you fucking dare get emotional now," she whispered, through gritted teeth. "You have no right."

"OK," said Hermione placidly, so as not to rile her up again. She then got distracted, spotting Kingsley and John Dawlish entering the Hall, looking grave.

"*They were closer now, Fernando*

Every hour, every minute seemed to last eternally

I was so afraid, Fernando

We were young and full of life and none of us prepared to die

And I'm not ashamed to say the roar of guns and cannons almost made me cry…"

She watched Kingsley navigate his way to Table Ten to tap on Gaspar's shoulder. Whatever he said made Gaspar choke on his drink. In less than a minute, he and Bedelia were being escorted out.

"*Now we're old and grey, Fernando*

Since many years I haven't seen a rifle in your hand

Can you hear the drums, Fernando?

Do you still recall the fateful night we crossed the Rio Grande?

I can see it in your eyes, how proud you were to fight for freedom in this land…"

Dawlish stopped at Table Six just behind Hermione and tapped on the shoulders of both Pollux and Melania.

"I'm sorry to cut your night short, Lord and Lady Black," he bent down to say lowly, "but we've just received word that a situation has arisen at one of your properties. An investigation is currently underway, for which your immediate presence is required."

Melania asked something that Hermione could not hear. When Dawlish wavered, Pollux slid his chequebook into sight.

“Esther Avery is dead.”

Tavaris inhaled a sharp breath. Hermione turned her head to find that he, too, had been eavesdropping. They both looked round at the same time to watch Dawlish lead Melania and Pollux away, whispers trailing after them. They had barely made it to the doors when Gawain Robards rushed in. He whispered frantically to Dawlish, who promptly burst into a sprint, abandoning the Blacks to disappear into the corridor beyond.

“*There was something in the air that night*

The stars were bright, Fernando

They were shining there for you and me

For liberty, Fernando…”

Robards kept on, racing over to the donations table to alert a young, tawny-haired Rufus Scrimgeour to whatever problem was evidently at hand; Scrimgeour began hastily hissing directions at him and Barty before taking off across the floor, dragging the latter with him. Nearly the entire Hall was watching by the time they made it to Table One to whisper in the ears of Minister Bagnold and Barty Crouch Sr.

“*Though I never thought that we could lose*

There’s no regret…”

“What in the world is going on?” Mr McKinnon asked, already halfway out of his seat. “Has there been another attack, do you think?”

“If so, they are minutes away from pulling our escorts,” said Tavaris, grabbing his walking-stick. “We’re off, darling.” He heaved himself up and pulled Hermione to her feet after him.

She glanced back at Marlene and Sirius; they were not looking at her, but at Table One, awaiting, perhaps, a signal from Professor Dumbledore.

“*If I had to do the same again*

I would, my friend, Fernando

Yes, if I had to do the same again

I would, my friend, Fernando…”

All she could think to say was, “Good-bye,” and then she was being steered away from them, the song softly ending.

“That was *Fernando* by ABBA,” Madam Bletchley said, loud and clear, as Minister Bagnold joined her up on the stage. “A Muggle group.” Out of all three performers, it was her reveal that seemed to shock the audience the most, for her music was a staple in many upper-class

homes. However, their attention was seized by their grim-faced Minister before any reproach could be voiced.

As soon as, “attack,” was uttered, several other parties were also getting up from their tables, panic spreading faster than any disease could ever hope to. Tavaris and Hermione were the first out, since they were the only ones who did not slow at the sound of the Minister telling everyone to remain seated.

“Why must we go so fast?” Hermione sniffled, staggering into him. She half-wanted to borrow his walking-stick.

“You have anxiety about leaving the house amidst the current conflict,” Tavaris informed her, in an undertone, as they continued past the security trolls and towards the counter. “It’s one of the reasons I’ve given as to why you aren’t seen at my side when I go out. This reaffirms that.” Momentarily releasing her, he reached into his pocket to retrieve their cloak-check numbers and handed them to Miss Ebner. As she turned away to Summon their belongings, he added, “Besides, we would’ve been leaving now regardless, just two reasons for which are that Marlene McKinnon looked like she was about to pounce on you, and that someone was bound to notice your pupils are dilated all the way to the Beyond.”

“That’s not good,” agreed Hermione, with another sniffle. She then offered Miss Ebner an apologetic smile when she passed over her coat and Tavaris’ cloak. “I’m sorry you were sacked. Madam Twilfitt really shouldn’t have been allowed to do that. Her reasoning was completely unjust.”

Miss Ebner raised her eyebrows, taken aback.

“Thank you, Mrs Nott,” she said, in a mystified voice.

“I’ll be in touch,” said Hermione, as Tavaris manoeuvred her arms into the sleeves of her coat. She vaguely heard him telling someone to bring their car round.

“All — all right.”

Down the counter, Amelia was on her feet. Her brother was with her, talking rapidly, but he stopped when he saw Hermione and Tavaris go by.

“Lord and Lady Nott, everyone has been asked to stay in their seats,” he said. His tone and stance were both firm, but there was a hollowness to him that hadn’t been there before. “Aurors are moving to respond to the threat in Godric’s Hollow as we speak. A taskforce of Hitwizards is reported to already be arriving on scene.”

Hermione’s voice sounded clogged when she spoke.

“Godric’s Hollow? But it’s almost Christmas!”

“The spirit of the holidays is hardly enough to dissuade You-Know-Who, Lady Nott,” said Edgar condescendingly. “Now, if you would wait a short while longer, we’ll be directing guests to the Floo in an orderly fashion.”

“We have a one-year-old who’s just begun crawling, Mr Bones,” said Tavaris; “we are not in the habit of leaving our Floo open.”

“Surely, you can wait the attack out,” said Amelia, glancing concernedly at Hermione. “We may not have the Aurors to spare.”

From the open front doors, a voice called, “Mr Nott, your car is waiting.”

“It appears that you do. Goodnight, Miss Bones, Mr Bones,” said Tavaris, and he led Hermione away once more. Over her shoulder, she saw Edgar take off in the direction of the Hall of Portraits and be met halfway by Sirius and Marlene.

The wind had grown fierce since their arrival earlier that night. She wobbled down the grand front steps and along the snow-free maroon carpet lined with shivering reporters.

“Mr Nott! Is it true that Godric’s Hollow is under attack?”

“That is a question best saved for Crouch and his team,” Tavaris replied diplomatically, as the backdoor to the sleek Ministry car idling at the end of the carpet was pulled open for them. Hermione was helped in first, but not before she caught sight of Sirius skidding to a halt at the top of the steps, panting for breath.

“I’m sorry,” she mouthed, and she ducked inside so as not to see what that message did to his face.

Fabian made a signal of some sort before rolling up his window and starting round the circular drive and into the pitch-black tunnel. His eyes frequently returned to the rear-view mirror as he drove, his shoulders fraught with tension.

Hermione was still sniffling. “It’s chilly,” she mumbled, huddling into the warmth of her fur coat.

“You’re smart to have gotten out so fast,” Fabian told them. “Had you waited a minute longer, I wouldn’t have been here to escort you.”

“Hence why we did not wait.”

“I think it’s more likely that you knew when to leave.”

“It has been a long night, Auror Prewett,” said Tavaris, as she lifted a hand to rub at her eyes. “We overheard some upsetting news concerning one of our friends. It should come as no surprise that we would be eager to return home, even if there hadn’t been an attack.”

Hermione frowned, drawing her hand back to stare at it.

“I’m crying,” she realised aloud. Dumbfounded, she studied the wet spot on her gloves, the stain of black mascara. “I’m sad.”

He looked away from Fabian and let out a long, tired sigh.

“I know, darling.”

“I think it was the song. *Fernando* is a sad song. Lily and I were singing it when the police came to inform us her parents had died.”

Tavaris wrapped his arm around her, fitting her snugly into his side. She could scarcely see now, her tears blurring the black interior of the car. Howling could be heard outside the window once they emerged from the tunnel, either of the wind or of another force entirely. The number of wizards from the Werewolf Capture Unit who had stood there previously had been cut in half.

“Please, don’t make me do that again, Tavaris.”

He shushed her gently. “I promise you,” he whispered into her hair, “you won’t have to.” Because, as he seemed to already know, those people would all be gone before long.

They rode the rest of the way back to Nottingham in silence. Tears continued to stream down Hermione’s face, although she could not feel them. She wondered what was happening in Godric’s Hollow, and why, and she wondered what had happened to Esther Avery, for that bit had clearly not been part of the plan. Most of all, though, she wondered if she had finally answered the Order’s question, purely by refusing to answer it at all.

When, at last, the car stopped out front of the Nott Estate, Hermione discovered she had dozed off; her eyelashes felt tacky as she blinked herself awake at Tavaris’ gentle prodding. He got out first, steadying himself with his walking-stick to better help her out once he had, because this time Fabian had not bothered exiting to open the door for them.

She looked at him, perhaps for the last time. The left sleeve of his robes had fallen back while he gripped the steering wheel; on his wrist, she spotted a familiar gold watch, not yet old and only somewhat battered. One day, seventeen years from now, after he and his brother had long since been struck down by Dolohov and four others, Harry would be the one to wear that wristwatch.

There were a hundred things that she wished to say and never could. What she settled on, like most things she had that night, felt feeble at best.

“That’s a really nice wristwatch,” she told Fabian, with all sincerity. “An old friend of mine has one just like it. He works in law enforcement, too, just like the brave man who wore it first.”

Fabian did not speak straight away. When he did, he twisted in his seat to look at her directly.

“If this friend is as good as you say, perhaps one day you’ll be brave enough to stop disappointing him.”

“Oh, Auror Prewett, you’ve got it all wrong,” said Hermione sadly. “It takes me far more bravery to disappoint than it does to instil pride. At the very least, know that.”

Chapter End Notes

I admit, I really do like frightening everyone with these Character Death warnings. Alas, they will soon be for the characters you think they are — it's practically my whole outline for the next chapter.

Nobby Leach was the first Muggle-born Minister for Magic, who left his post after contracting a mysterious illness that later killed him. Abraxas Malfoy was believed to have had a hand in it.

As for the mention of the Canadian government, being a colony, it makes sense to me that they'd send over Aurors just as they would soldiers, and when a motion won't go through the Canadian Supreme Court, appeals can be made to the House of Lords, so ... I was really just copying how things go in the Muggle world.

Finally, the Gloria Gaynor song was, of course, I Will Survive.

Checkmate

Chapter Summary

> In a crooked little town
> They were lost and never found
> Fallen leaves, fallen leaves
> Fallen leaves on the ground
> Run away before you drown
> Or the streets will beat you down
> Fallen leaves, fallen leaves
> Fallen leaves on the ground
> — Fallen Leaves, Billy Talent

Chapter Notes

> CW: Minor Character Death(s), and Minor Character Death(s), and did I mention Minor Character Death(s)? There will be Minor Character Death(s). Also, a cliff-hanger far worse than the last one I stuck you with.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Four articles took up the front page of *The Daily Prophet* on the morning after the Yule Gala.

According to the bottom-right corner, Esther Avery had been the catalyst of her own demise. Plainly (and admittedly unsympathetically) put, she had made what anyone with even a shred of common sense would have known was an extremely unwise decision and had let her five-finger habit get the best of her while at Number 12 Grimmauld Place; the silver candlestick she had attempted to swipe had been Charmed to sense thievery and Cursed to consume and subsequently drain its non-Black beholder of blood. The funeral was to be held on Christmas day, and due to the scandal surrounding her late husband's death — as well as Esther's own unpopularity — the number of attendees was predicted to be low. As for the Blacks, since owning but not using Dark artefacts and Cursed objects alike was entirely within the realm of legality, the Auror Office merely told them something along the lines of, "Hey, maybe don't leave that stuff out in the open from now on."

At the forefront of the page — just above the photograph of Walburga and Pollux speaking to Kingsley in his Auror robes in Grimmauld Place's dining room — was a much thicker article about the Death Eaters' attack on Godric's Hollow. Lily, Hermione suspected, had probably resorted to extreme measures to prevent James from sprinting out of the cottage and diving headfirst into the fight. She could imagine how difficult it must have been for them, listening,

and forcing themselves not to act. Four Muggles had been killed, and sixteen had sustained injuries; two wizards were in hospital, and a third had died on route, the force of the Portkey having overwhelmed them in their critical state. As far as the Auror Office was (publicly) aware, there had been no true motivation behind the attack other than to hit the community whilst their defenders were being celebrated elsewhere.

"*Their goal last night was to make a mockery of our tribute to the Aurors*," Minister Bagnold had told the *Prophet*. "*By forcing the guests of honour to leave the event, and just before it came time for the tree-lighting ceremony — which would have been in commemoration of the eleven Aurors who have died protecting our citizens — the Death Eaters have proved yet again that they have no remorse for the lives they've taken. And it is vital to our collective victory that the people continue to bear that in mind*."

Slightly below another quote — this one from Crouch Sr which gave what was essentially the same message, albeit rather more aggressively delivered — there was the smallest article of the bunch. No more than a couple of sentences, it read:

Werewolves target Muggle town near Upper Flagley in Yorkshire, leaving eight dead and ten confirmed infected so far. Fenrir Greyback still at large.

But it was the column left of that which currently held Hermione's attention.

WHERE ARE THE POTTERS?

While He Who Must Not Be Named's followers executed their vicious attack on Godric's Hollow yesterday evening, a second location nearby was also targeted. The Auror Office has reason to believe that a house on the outskirts of the wizarding and Muggle village was trespassed by at least one Death Eater during the attack: the home of the late Fleamont Potter, founder of Sleekeazy's Hair Potion*, and his wife, and now of their surviving son, James (20), and his own wife (also 20).*

Dubbed 'The Potter's House' by a generation of Potters past in recognition of their namesake — a humble potter who resided on the property half a millennium ago — their home has been rebuilt and refurbished with every turn of the century, consistently well-kept. But now, the Potter's House has begun to slip into disrepair. In the hour which followed the attack, a team of Aurors visited the home on account of a second Dark Mark, separate from the one which had been cast over the village. Upon further investigation, the body of a house-elf who had long served the family was found in the first-floor drawing room, dead by means of the Killing Curse. There was no trace of the two young Potters, although a close friend of the family, who wishes to remain anonymous, promises that the Potters and their infant son, Harry, are alive and well, and presently living elsewhere.

What the Auror Office finds most suspicious is that the house bore no signs of a break-in, nor struggle. It was accessed through the front door, and the protective wards which surround the property remained wholly intact upon Auror arrival.

"Whoever is responsible for the murder of that elf entered freely," says one Auror on the scene, Rufus Scrimgeour. "If the Potters hope to keep themselves hidden, they'll need to start questioning which of their friends they should really be trusting."

The photograph paired with it was practically minuscule, but once Hermione realised what she was looking at, an icy shock slithered down her spine.

It was the first house that the Dark Lord had taken her to at the end of July; the one that she had recognised but had not been able to identify. She now knew why it had seemed familiar; she had seen photographs of it once before, when Harry and Ginny had visited a few months prior to their wedding as a result of her own urging for the former to make an appointment at Gringotts Bank to get a better idea of what lay in his vault, and of whatever else was otherwise in his name. Harry had deemed the place "a bit much" for just them. Similarly, Ginny had complained that the walls were too high, and that she felt like a criminal for touching the sheeted furniture. They had agreed to leave the house as it was, unwilling to move anything when the last person to have done so may have been James or Lily.

Instead, they had had a house constructed on a large plain of green in Devon, just twenty kilometres south of the Burrow, which had pale-yellow siding, red shutters, a wrap-around porch, furniture that did not match, and plenty of space for a miniature Quidditch pitch.

Hermione took it all in with a determinedly even breath; the Dark Lord had brought her to check on both the Longbottoms' house and the Potters'. Yet, most mysteriously, of the latter, he had said nothing. It seemed that he thought all her unquestionable questions had unanswerable answers; if she could safely ask it, the Dark Lord would refuse to answer it.

She set her copy of the morning paper on the sitting-room coffee table and rubbed her temple to try to ease her headache. Gesturing to the paper with her other hand, she said, "This was Peter's work, I presume?"

"It's not as though the Potters have any other friends who are so helpfully spineless," Tavaris replied, without glancing up from his own copy, which he perused whilst sat comfortably on the armchair. He flipped forwards several pages, then gave a slight smile. "They chose a nice photo of us for this."

"Not one of me looking like I'm experimenting with hallucinogens, then, I take it?"

"Everyone should experiment with hallucinogens at least once in their lives."

Hermione looked at him incredulously.

"Tell me I did *not* just hear that correctly."

“Not to worry, I’m sure you did,” he muttered unconcernedly, picking his tea up off the end table. “And those at the *Prophet* know better than to print an unflattering picture of you, darling — not when we own twenty percent of its shares.”

Meanwhile, he answers the questions I didn’t even have.

A small shriek from the rug interrupted her thoughts before they could truly begin to race. She looked down at Theodore, who was grinning excitedly and holding up a wooden block with an orange “*B*” painted on the front. As she watched, it vanished from his grasp with a gentle *pop*; within a second, another block appeared beside him on the rug, this one with a yellow “*C*.” He shrieked again when he saw it.

“*Wow*,” she breathed, widening her eyes dramatically. “It’s the letter ‘C’ — ‘C’ for *cat* and for *Crookshanks*.” She pointed to the latter, curled up between Tavaris’ feet and shedding ginger hair on his loafers. “*Cruh—kuh—sh—anks*. Crookshanks the cat.”

“Cuh—kuh a cah,” was Theodore’s eager attempt, and then his attention was stolen by another *pop* as a “*D*” replaced “*C*.”

Tavaris gave him a word this time. “‘D’ for *darling*,” he said, peering over the top of his paper.

“Dah—ee.”

Hermione picked up her own cup of tea for a long sip that helped soothe her pounding head enough to work out her thoughts. She felt as though she were in battle with the sort of raging hangover that made young, inexperienced drinkers claim that they would never consume alcohol again. When Theodore got to the letter “*F*,” she was ready to look at Tavaris again.

“So it’s you who controls the *Prophet*,” she said. “You’re the one who has them print what the Ministry would prefer to keep quiet.”

Tavaris lowered his paper. Hesitantly, he inclined his head.

“*Control* is a strong word,” he said, after a second. “But I encourage them to print what the Dark Lord wishes to be known, yes.” He nodded to her copy. “Take that column you were just reading for example — it’s a message to the Potters, front page so they can’t miss it. Killing their house-elf was more than just a confirmation of a spy among them, more than just a show of power; that column, with its headline, tells them we haven’t stopped looking, and that the longer they conceal themselves, the more people will pay for it.”

It was not yet two weeks into the dreaded year of 1981 when the next several people were sentenced to pay this price.

Hermione paced the width of the front hall, waiting for Tavaris to return home from a day which he had predicted to be entirely taken up by a lengthy session of the Wizengamot. That morning’s edition of the *Prophet* was clutched tightly in her hand, half-crumpled from having scarcely left it since breakfast. She had given Theodore to Dinky to mind, for she did not want him to see her like this, with her eyes swollen and red and her tongue between her teeth

to keep from grinding them together. She did not want him to witness his mother shouting at his father, and right now, that was precisely what she planned to do.

At last, the front doors opened, but Tavaris did not enter alone; Abraxas was with him, and they were laughing, as if there could possibly be anything to laugh about that day.

She halted in the middle of the hall, enraged.

"OF ALL THE METHODS!" she bellowed, stopping them in their tracks. She held up the *Prophet*, forcing the front page into their line of sight. "Of all the methods they could've chosen, *this* is the one they went with?"

The laughter faded into two sighs simultaneously exhaled. Tavaris and Abraxas shared an unsurprised look.

"*Fiendfyre*," Hermione said furiously. "To kill them is cruel enough, but to do so by burning them alive? There was a *child* in that house!"

"A crup, too," said Tavaris randomly.

Abraxas pretended to sniffle.

"Awful, just awful," he muttered. "The poor creature was probably barking and whining for help until its last, dying breath …" Thoughtfully, he added, "Actually, what *is* the canine equivalent to screaming?"

"That boy was *four years old* —" Her voice trembled and cracked. "He likely didn't understand that there's a war going on, let alone that his name had the potential to be added to its list of casualties. It's sick! *Sick*! What sort of monster would burn a four-year-old boy alive?"

"The Carrow twins, obviously."

She scoffed.

"In addition to Wormtail — he was there earlier in the week to seal the windows, although he was not involved in the actual attack," said Abraxas, as the pair hung their outerwear on the cloak stand. "And the Traverses, of course."

Her jaw dropped.

"The *Traverses*?" she repeated, horrified. "*Both* of them?"

"All three of them," he corrected. "Lachlan, Eamon, *and* young Carden."

"I imagine they might've been the ones to choose the method," said Tavaris reflectively, as he headed for the sitting room. "After all, it can be cast from a distance; perhaps they didn't want to see their faces, or have *them* see *their* faces, for that matter."

Abraxas made a noise of emphatic agreement.

“Even with masks on, she would’ve recognised them.”

As they disappeared into the sitting room, she heard a sudden snap of fingers.

“*Howling*! It would’ve been *howling* for help!”

“Ah, that’s it! *Howling*.”

Choking back vile, Hermione stormed after them.

“How can you joke about this?” she demanded.

“You knew this was coming, Mione,” said Tavaris, quite candidly. He settled into the armchair while Abraxas made for the drink cart. “They did it to themselves. Truly, it is the height of dishonour for a family of good blood to put themselves at risk by associating with Mudbloods and half-breeds, and simply so that they might turn around and tell us that *we* are the dishonourable ones for not doing the same.”

Within his frame, Cantankerus nodded significantly.

“There is a line, and they crossed it.”

Abraxas unstoppered the decanter of firewhiskey. “A regrettable number of old families lean the same way,” he said, beginning to pour, “but they don’t speak out about it. They don’t interact with Muggles even if they claim not to be averse. It’s how the Prewetts and Longbottoms conduct themselves — most of them, anyway — and even the vast majority of the Weasley clan.”

“The latter *have* been getting louder these past two generations, though.”

He snorted, turning back with the finished drinks. Handing one to Tavaris, he added snidely, “Arthur Weasley’s a bit too proud of his work with Muggle artefacts, if you ask me.”

“That’s the line, is it, the way you see it?” said Hermione. “Outspokenness.”

“Well, to rightly be deemed a blood traitor, one must contribute to the problem.” Tavaris took what appeared to be a satisfying sip before continuing. “A bystander will continue to stand by when the tide changes, but those who make themselves at home on the shore can always be counted on to build a dam.”

It was both mind-boggling and infuriating how he could say something so wise to support something so irrational.

“The Dark Lord would never spill magical blood without good reason, Mione.”

“To truly believe that you must be madder than I thought.”

“It was a *party*, Mione,” said Abraxas, stretching out on the sofa with his own tumbler, the singular difference between their drinks being that his was filled with ice; Tavaris did not take his that way anymore. “Plenty more people were meant to be there last night. But the

Dark Lord was mindful, and their lack of threat granted them his mercy. They were taken care of."

An ominous boiling expanded in her stomach.

"What does that mean," she asked, "'taken care of?'"

"It means that measures were taken to assure that those in attendance were the intended targets and the intended targets alone. Barty handled the Macmillans by exposing their children to a serum sample contaminated with the Black Cat Flu," Tavaris explained; "his other cousin, the Diggorys' boy, was Jinxed off his broom, landing him straight in hospital; and Bellatrix saw to it that Victoria's little protégé — some witch called Skeeter — didn't make it to the party, either."

One might consider that last bit to be rather a shame.

"Narcissa says they shared a dormitory at Hogwarts, you know," Abraxas told Tavaris, which had Hermione momentarily stymied. "Apparently, all Bellatrix did to prevent her from coming was visit her flat and say, 'I wouldn't do that if I were you.'" This fact seemed to amuse him, for he snickered into his drink. "She may be a half-blood, but I must admit, I have a certain respect for that Skeeter. She was the only one to receive warning of the attack, yet she did nothing to prevent it."

Glancing down at the *Prophet*, Hermione was met, not for the first time, with the cheery photograph of a family of seven, plus their pet Crup. Above them was the headline: *MCKINNONS MASSACRED*.

According to the obituaries, the funeral was in six days' time.

Tavaris and the Malfoys all had the gall to attend.

It was a week later that the true reason for their high spirits that day came to light, however, when a new Bill was revealed to have been introduced in the Wizengamot the morning after the McKinnons had been murdered and was swiftly passed with an exceedingly vast majority of votes. This Bill, Hermione had no difficulty deducing, had also been the reason Tavaris had sought Dolores Umbridge out at the Yule Gala. Even if she had been the one to introduce it, it was him who had been behind it, and by extension, the Dark Lord.

Among Harry's list of potential guardians, Marlene's had been the only name crossed out thus far, but after the first failed attempt to draw a strike through Remus' by offering him a place in Greyback's pack, the Dark Lord had found a newer and cleverer way of accomplishing it. According to the shortened copy of Umbridge's new Bill that had been released by the *Prophet* the day of its passing, he had succeeded.

1981 C-18

The Children Against Lycanthropy Act

A.1. *(1.1) For the protection of all British wizarding youth and in the hope of preventing the spread of the lycanthropic disease among them, no beast infected by lycanthropy shall hereby ever share a residence, nor possess or retain legal guardianship over a magical child, (1.2) that child being an uninfected witch or wizard under the age of seventeen.*

A.2. *(2.1) This law shall apply in all circumstances and among all wizarding children and lycanthropes, including in the event that no alternative guardian is available to take custody of the child in question, (2.2) unless one or both of the following statements should apply: the child is already infected by lycanthropy, or the lycanthrope is the child's biological parent; (2.3) however, in the case of the latter statement, should the child's biological parents live separately, and only one parent be a lycanthrope, full custody of that child shall go to the uninfected parent.*

A.3. *(3.1) It must be noted that should a non-lycanthropic witch or wizard with guardianship over a similarly uninfected child proceed to share a residence with a lycanthrope following the enactment of this law, the guardian shall thereby be charged with committing the crime of Child Endangerment, in accordance to A.6.2 of the Child Welfare Act of 1968, and, therefore, shall face either or both the Wizengamot and the Council of Magical Law, who shall then decide if the parent may retain guardianship over his or her child; (3.2) whether that child be biological or otherwise.*

A.4. *(4.1) If any wizarding child is discovered to have been in any way and to any degree infected with lycanthropy whilst sharing a residence with a lycanthrope, that lycanthrope shall thereby be charged with, and face either or both the Wizengamot and the Council of Magical Law for, committing the following crimes: Child Endangerment, Child Abuse, Domestic Assault, Attempted Murder, and Forcing the Bite, in accordance to A.1.4 and A.6.2 of the Child Welfare Act, A.5.1 of the Harm of the Household Prevention Act of 1973, A.3.2 of the Murder Act of 1764, and A.2.1 of the Wizards Over Werewolves Act of 1801; (4.2) whether the lycanthrope in question is directly responsible for the infection or not, (4.3) and whether the lycanthrope has guardianship over the harmed child or not; (4.4) likewise, any existing non-lycanthropic guardian of the child who lives in the same residence shall, too, be charged with committing the crime of Child Endangerment.*

A.5. *(5.1) In the event that a non-lycanthropic child's sole guardian is or becomes a lycanthrope who is not an immediate blood relative, that child shall thereby be placed in the custody of their next of kin, i.e., the child's closest non-lycanthropic relative; (5.2) if no such relative is available, arrangements for alternative housing and/or guardianship for the aforementioned child shall be decided upon and conducted by the Magical Child Welfare Association, in accordance to A.11.4 of the Child Welfare Act.*

In the plainest of terms, this Bill was how Harry had wound up in the custody of his aunt and uncle. Perhaps, regardless of the blood protection provided by his mother and survived by his aunt, he would have still been given to Remus had it not been for this.

But that was not the end of Hermione's suspicions. All the hesitating Tavaris did around Remus' name, all the clear disgruntlement its very mention seemed to cause him even before learning of Remus' lycanthropy, all the information that he had received from the reports

made whilst she was at Hogwarts — it was easy to see, now that she was really looking. The Dark Lord could have had Remus killed, kidnapped, or maybe have had a spy, be it Peter or someone else, alter James and Lily's will, but this method — Tavaris' method — was borne from a different motivation.

Jealousy. It was entirely ridiculous, nearly incomprehensible, and it hurt her head to even ponder it, yet she had a niggling feeling that it may be true. *He's jealous.*

And what would a jealous Slytherin do?

Although the Children Against Lycanthropy Act targeted an entire population of people afflicted with the same curse, it had been created with only one of them in mind. And while it would indeed prevent that person from ever taking custody of Harry, Hermione suspected that was not the whole point. If she was right, it was also to prevent him from ever living under the same roof as Theodore.

If something should happen to Tavaris, although she knew nothing would, their marriage bond would be broken, and he had ensured that, in the event of his death, she would not go running back to the man whom the Death Eaters' reports suggested she would.

With this thought in mind, it took several days for her to be able to look Tavaris in the eye again.

*

As winter melted into spring, the deaths continued to pile up with a speed like never before. The sight of the *Prophet* waiting beside her breakfast each morning — paired with at least one already opened letter imploring her to join the Ladies' Tea Society — consistently churned Hermione's stomach. Amidst all the atrocities, only two Death Eaters had been caught and sentenced thus far: Pomroy Snyde and Duko Lee, both of whose photographed faces she recalled from that horrid Death Eater meeting a year prior. The crimes of their wives, stealthier as Tavaris claimed they were, had yet to be proven. They, too, however, had been interrogated, and Hermione knew it was only a matter of time before they joined their husbands in Azkaban.

None of them would be among the escapees in 1996.

In the wake of the scandal, the host of *Witching Hour*, Ruby Lee, as the niece of Duko, was taken off the air. For days, Angus bemoaned the loss of her seductive voice.

Meanwhile, after nailing down "Ma" and "Pa" by the end of December, Theodore had begun to learn the names of all the other people he saw coming in and out of the estate. Although he could not pronounce them, it soon became clear whom he was addressing: "Abby" (Abraxas), "Annie" (Evangeline), "Lou" (Lucius), "Cissy" (Narcissa), "Mun-mun" (Edmund), "Rod-fuss" (Rodolphus), "Eel-yeh" (Bedelia), "Cigs" (Cygnus), and "Yaco" (Draco).

He had no name for Geoffrey. For some reason, Geoffrey steered clear whenever Theodore was roaming about.

Hermione's personal favourites consisted of "Gus" (Angus), "Stan" (Rabastan), "Ian" (Evan), and "Batty" (Barty). Tavaris, on the other hand, was partial to "Sap" (Snape) and "Ass" (Gaspar). Gaspar, too, found his new nickname amusing. Snape, naturally, did not.

"I expect *you* taught him that?" he asked Hermione sourly, as he removed his cloak for Dinky to take.

Theodore wobbled on his feet, holding on to her hands for support as they practiced taking steps in the front hall.

"I didn't have to," she replied loftily. "He's very perceptive."

"I don't believe I shall ever understand you, Lady Nott," said Snape, and off he went to the study, shooting a dark look at the vase of orange lilies as he did.

It was a common confession. Only Professor Dumbledore would ever truly understand Hermione's motives, and that knowledge was a weight she carried every day, fighting to stay afloat as it grew heavier with each new headline.

YOU-KNOW-WHO SIGHTED IN KENSINGTON: UNSPEAKABLE DEAD IN HIS WAKE

In the early hours of Thursday morning, the Auror Office received word that You-Know-Who himself was sighted leaving a flat in Kensington. The witness, who shall remain anonymous due to concerns for their safety, claims that they had been returning home from a night shift at work when they spotted "a cloaked figure," who had "eyes like burning coals" and "skin that looked like it had not a drop of blood in it," stepping outside the building and proceeding to cast the Dark Mark overhead. Based on past accounts, this description leaves no doubt that it was You-Know-Who the witness saw.

Little investigation was required to uncover what You-Know-Who had been doing there. The flat he was seen exiting had been the home of twenty-nine-year-old Unspeakable Dorcas Meadowes, whose body was found on the floor of the flat's small kitchen, with signs of struggle. At this time, the reason for which Meadowes was targeted are unknown. Any theories of those who worked alongside her in the Department of Mysteries are, predictably, being withheld.

Meadowes lived alone, with the sole exception of her pet cat, whose remains were found nearby. Her closest living relatives, her parents, declined comment.

For further information on You-Know-Who's past sightings, see page 10.

*

About the time that Theodore began walking all throughout the estate and Abraxas lost fifty Galleons due to Draco's first speech being limited to a single word ("yours"), Hermione attended the only funeral she both could and would out of the many which had been held.

She stood in silence between Tavaris and Barty, whose mother had been sympathetic enough to accompany him. Crouch Sr, on the other hand, would have lost it if he knew his wife and son were currently in attendance behind his back, even though this death had been largely dismissed. There was no uproar anymore, because a Death Eater hidden among the upper echelons of society was no longer a shock; they were everywhere, and everyone knew it.

The tombstone they all gazed upon had the sigil of a rose tree etched onto it, and its inscription read:

Heir Evan C. Rosier

27 May 1961 – 26 May 1981

A treasured son, a beloved brother, and a great loss.

Barty's tongue darted out to lick his upper lip, drinking in a phantom tear: a memory of another.

Moody now looked exactly as he did in Hermione's memory, yet another piece of him stolen by the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters. *Maimed once more,* the *Prophet* wrote in their coverage of the event on page two: there had been no room for it on the front page; the attack during which Moody had struck Evan down had also resulted in the deaths of three others, and theirs had been deemed far more significant than Evan's.

SON AND GRANDCHILDREN OF IMPROPER USE OF MAGIC HEAD MURDERED IN OWN HOME

There had been no signs of forced entry, only the wreckage of the ensuing fight, damage caused by both Death Eaters and the help that had just barely been called in time: Moody, of course, as well as Gideon and Fabian Prewett. The Auror Office suspected that, whilst Evan and two other masked wizards had waited beyond the property line, a fourth had simply strode up and knocked on the door.

There were only two Death Eaters whom Edgar Bones would have so naively invited into his home: Peter and Barty.

It was not long after they had returned from the funeral that Tavaris resorted to shoving Rabastan and the latter out onto the grounds behind the Nott Estate, barking at them to take their anger out right then and there before they did something stupid, and Hermione got all the confirmation she required.

"If it weren't for that *USELESS* —" Barty screeched as he and Rabastan went at each other on the grass, their need to retaliate apparently too great to satisfy without drawing blood with their own hands, "— *WAND-FUMBLING — RAT-BRAINED — COWARDLY SHIT*!"

Edmund had his wand drawn whilst he, Tavaris, Rodolphus, and Hermione all watched them brawl, waiting with an indifferent expression for the moment he would need to step in to prevent Barty from breaking any of his son's bones.

"*THAT PATHETIC — FUCKING — EXCUSE FOR A SPY*!"

Rabastan caught him on the lip, and briefly, Barty stopped screaming to spit out a mouthful of blood. With renewed fury, he managed to regain the upper-hand by bashing his head into Rabastan's nose.

"*Ducking out of the way when Moody got his wand on him! THE NEXT TIME I SEE HIS FACE —*!" He was cut off once again, this time by Edmund, who had decided enough was enough and had sent him flying off Rabastan to land roughly five yards away.

On Peter's next visit, Tavaris and Edmund took him, Barty, and Rabastan out on an afternoon-long excursion, so that, as Edmund later put it, "the boys could get that out of their systems once and for all."

Time, Hermione felt, was moving far too fast.

The Death Eaters, with the taste of fresh blood now consistently on their tongues, took to celebrating their success with increasing frequency. By May, it seemed that a party of some sort was being held every week, sometimes more than once, and it was nearly every day that an invitation made it through her heavily filtered post.

Beltane was recognised — boisterously, from what she heard — at the Lestranges' summer home in Champagne; shortly thereafter, the Parkinsons went all out with a grand ball, of which the second and unspoken purpose was to find a husband for their unwed nineteen-year-old, Preciosa; however, the first of what Hermione did attend was a highly belated housewarming thrown in Phillimore Gardens a week later, in honour of the new Lady Avery. To give Theodore the opportunity to play with more of his peers, she also attended the events held at Malfoy Manor, which included a soirée with live music and lounging amidst heavy tobacco smoke, then a garden party with belligerent bragging about the ranking of one's husband and pecking peacocks that knocked drinks out of hands, and finally, an intimate wine-tasting that concluded with more than one Mulciber on the floor and an impromptu duel between Abraxas and Tavaris when the latter, aiming for a laugh, brought out a bottle of something besides Superior Red.

Hosted at the Nott Estate, meanwhile, were several dinners at which, predictably, the guests descended into degenerative levels of drunkenness.

Too soon, summer was upon them.

On the second Tuesday of June, when the sun was high and hot, Tavaris, Lucius, and Barty had congregated out on the grounds and now appeared to be in the process of labelling a large assortment of wooden boxes that lay scattered on the yellow grass. Tags sat in a pile on a long glass table with bronze legs, along with a variety of other gift-wrapping supplies and a few quills and bottles of ink. Beads of sweat were gathered on their foreheads and their robes had been discarded on a nearby armchair, which had clearly been Conjured.

“No, no, that’s the wrong one!” Tavaris said, swatting Barty’s hands away as he tried to stick a tag on a box with crisp, white wrappings. “They can’t be given to someone who won’t even recognise them!”

“Who should they bloody go to, then?” asked Barty.

Before he could answer, Tavaris caught sight of Hermione and Theodore. Brightening, he straightened up from his spot on the grass, sitting with his bad leg extended in front of him. Letting go of Hermione’s hands, Theodore ran clumsily over to his father and flung himself onto his lap.

Tavaris let out a grunt at the impact.

“Pa!” cried Theodore, grinning. “Hi!”

“Good afternoon, Theodore,” chuckled Tavaris, shifting him onto his good leg. He looked up at Hermione. “What have you two been getting up to today?”

“We’ve just been working on our walking,” she said. “I figured he should get some Vitamin D.” Ignoring the questioning looks at that last bit, she gestured and added, “What’s all this about?”

Barty snickered as he stuck a tag on a new box. He and Lucius exchanged morbidly amused looks.

“How terribly rude of me,” said Tavaris. He waved to the scattered boxes. “Darling, allow me to introduce you to Benjy Fenwick.”

Theodore looked about confusedly for another person.

“Say hello, Benjy,” mocked Barty. At the lack of response, he shook his head, trying for morose. “I’m afraid he’s not quite capable of answering at the minute. Otherwise, I’m sure he’d tell you that it’s an absolute honour to make your acquaintance.”

“Indeed,” drawled Lucius. “I recall him being exceptionally friendly when we were in school.”

“Whe’e, Batty?” asked Theodore. “I no see ‘body.”

Barty picked up the smallest of the boxes and bent down in front of him, turning it over in his hands.

“*He’s hiding in these*,” he whispered conspiratorially.

Theodore gave a big gasp of surprise and clapped his hands to his cheeks. He stared at the box in wide-eyed wonder.

“I know. Impressive, isn’t it? A *whole person* is hiding in *all* these boxes at the *same time*.”

Feeling dizzy, Hermione counted the boxes: there were twelve; twelve bits that remained of Benjy Fenwick, and they were all to be sent out as neatly-wrapped packages for those who knew him to open.

She sucked in a deep breath, tried to swallow, then hunched over and vomited onto the grass.

“What an impolite way to greet someone you’ve just met,” remarked Lucius.

DEATH EATERS TEAR SCOTTISH WIZARD TO SHREDS

After that, Hermione stopped letting Theodore outside on the occasions that someone else was already out there, for he, just like her, had grown far too comfortable in the company of these men. She also stopped joining Tavaris for breakfast on the days he was not leaving early all so Theodore could be with his father, and instead took them both back to the conservatory.

On the third day of returning to this routine, the name of another member of the Order of the Phoenix made it into the *Prophet* — page twelve, to be exact.

ANTIQUARIAN JOINS LONG LIST OF MISSING PERSONS

Only the culprits themselves would ever know the truth of Caradoc Dearborn’s disappearance from his Diagon Alley antique shop, not in the fourteen years it would take for the war to remerge and not in the thirty-eight currently separating them from the year Hermione had been torn from.

The desire to find out what had happened was more than just that: it was a need; an itch that screamed for relief, made worse by the fact that she had someone so close who could provide it if she only asked. In seconds, she was forming a plan to do much as she had after the McKinnons’ murder and wait by the front doors to demand the full story from Tavaris the second he returned from the Ministry.

Crookshanks suddenly let out a loud, mournful whine.

Together, she and Theodore shot him a glance, but he was only pawing at the fern in the corner, so she returned her attention to the *Prophet*’s small photograph of a quaint, blue-awninged shopfront, whose windows were smashed and whose lights were burnt out, the cobblestone before it littered with shards of glass and fine chinaware. A sign dangled crookedly from its hinges above where there would have once been a door, and in silver italics, it read: *Countering the Cursed: Antiques Made New, est. 1972.*

The article called Dearborn, *an exceptionally talented and experienced Curse-Breaker, who left the field to help the common witch and wizard with their most meddlesome heirlooms.*

Crookshanks gave another whine, which was immediately followed by a gasp from Theodore. Distractedly, Hermine followed the latter's curious gaze to the fern.

She did a double-take.

As reality sunk in, so did horror, for it was not Billy Stubbs in his terracotta pot who currently held Crookshanks' attention.

With shaking hands, she put aside the paper. At first, she wanted to shout, to release an outrage that bordered on violent, but a sudden thought stopped her. She recalled what had happened the last time she had questioned Tavaris on this: his wand at her throat, his eyes cold and unfeeling.

"If you weren't already pregnant …"

In the end, Hermione asked him nothing. Instead, she laid awake all night, tossing and turning, wondering herself sick at the truth of her suspicions.

Still, she did not dare ask why there were now two ferns in the conservatory.

*

At last, the air lost its humidity, and cool breezes greeted the dawn each time it came. Having been wrestled into warm woollen jumpers and tiny dragon-hide boots, Theodore and Draco were traipsing cheerfully across the front lawn of the estate, tackling each other with every slip and fall, which, particularly in the latter's case, were as frequent as each step.

"You should consider having your elf see to this grass," Narcissa said as she, Hermione, and Bedelia strolled after the two toddling toddlers. "Really, it's been left in this state for far too long. Over a decade, if I recall."

The fabric of Hermione's cloak flapped in the wind. "What use would it be to start gardening now?" she said pessimistically, as she secured it better around herself. "The grass would be dead again in a month, anyway."

"Back home, we have an elf whose singular job is to tend the gardens," Bedelia said, and she flushed slightly. "My parents' home, that is. The Avery house hasn't got much of a garden, as you've seen. Just that small courtyard in the back."

"Groomed well, a courtyard can be just as appealing as a bountiful garden. Aunt Walburga …" Narcissa paused briefly, pursing her lips. "To be quite frank with you, she has allowed her elf to let the one at Grimmauld Place fall into disrepair. But it was once quite charming."

Just then, Theodore came barrelling over to yank on Hermione's cloak, a big grin on his face. She matched it as best she could and picked him up to settle on her hip.

“Ma, see ‘at?” he said with a thrill. He was waving his hand in her face, clutching a leaf that had clearly come from one of the English oaks perched on the slope near the cemetery.

A chill flooded her chest, freezing her lungs.

“Yes, Theodore,” she said hoarsely. “I do see that.”

“Yeh-whoa,” he said, peering first at the leaf and then at the grass beneath them. His face lit up, and he pointed to the latter. “Yeh-whoa, too!”

“That’s right, Theodore,” said Bedelia, leaning over to smile at him. “The grass is also yellow.”

“But it is meant to be green,” Narcissa told him imperiously. “*Green* grass.”

Not a second later, Draco crashed into her feet, looking close to tears. He began to swat at her leg in demand.

“*Yours*!” he screeched once he had succeeding in making it into her arms. He flailed his own arm in the direction of Theodore, trying to swipe at the leaf. “*No*, ‘Ee-oh! Yours!”

Of course, what Draco really meant was, “Mine.” But that was not what he got told. What he did get told was —

“Hush now, Draco, dear,” soothed his mother. “I shall find a bigger and better one, and that one shall be yours.”

This appeared to mollify him somewhat. As Narcissa carried him away to search for another leaf, he shot Theodore a smug look over her shoulder, as if to say, “Ha! I win!”

“Do you know why it’s yellow, Theodore?” asked Bedelia, in the gentle, crooning voice one commonly reserved for small children. “Because it’s autumn, and in autumn, the leaves turn all sorts of colours! Yellow, and red, and brown … And once they have, do you know what they do?”

Theodore waited with his mouth hanging partly open.

“*They fall*.”

That night, there was no shortage of people visiting the estate. Dinner was a tense affair. Hermione’s fork shook slightly every time she lifted it to her mouth, Bedelia’s sips from her goblet of wine were unusually sloppy, and Narcissa dabbed her lips with her napkin more often than necessary, a nervous tick. They ate in the conservatory, Theodore and Draco with them, to separate the children and themselves from the other visitors: Barty, Gaspar, Angus, Geoffrey, and the reason they were all in masks prior to their departure, Dolohov.

Hermione could not get the number out of her head. Suddenly, she saw it everywhere: five lilies filled the vase in the front hall; five books laid in a stack on her desk; five teddies lined the topmost shelf of Theodore’s bookcase; five products made up her nightly skincare regimen; five pillows rested on her bed —

Five Death Eaters. One of them Dolohov.

That was the night that the Prewett twins joined the dead.

AURORS CORNERED BY DEATH EATERS: PREWETT SONS KILLED IN DEADLY DUEL

The tears could not have fallen faster. Hermione sucked in a large breath that got stuck at the back of her throat. She shoved the paper back onto the conservatory table — and immediately choked.

This time, Crookshanks was not there to provide a warning; sat directly across from her, invisible until that very moment, was the Dark Lord.

His abrupt appearance caused Theodore to shriek in alarm, then start to cry as he began scrabbling at the tray of his highchair to free himself. In seconds, she had picked him up and hidden him in her arms.

"What do you want?" she demanded, in a tremulous voice.

"So impatient," the Dark Lord remarked, clicking his tongue. "It's as if you are not pleased to see me."

She had nothing to say to that, because, really, what part of his presence was there to be pleased about?

"I, on the other hand, am always pleased to see *you*, Lady Nott," he went on, with a slight twitch of his lips. He shifted smoothly, getting comfortable, and took out his wand, chuckling at her flinch. All he did with it, however, was Conjure a second teacup. "I thought I would join you for your tea this morning. Keep you company whilst you grieve. It is a terrible shame, what became of those boys … I was almost sorry to give the order."

"Being sorry indicates remorse," said Hermione coldly.

"Hence the word, *almost*." He reached for the porcelain teapot at the centre of the table and filled his cup nearly to the brim, apparently planning to linger long enough to finish it. "Even I once considered the Prewetts to be of noble blood and standing. It is unfortunate. Now, with Ignatius and Benedict both possessing only sisters, and Lucretia having been so woefully barren, the male line will die out in a matter of a few decades …"

Barren, she thought. *Not quite.* Hidden away in the Muggle world like a skeleton in a closet remained an accountant.

"Alas, it is the fault of Gideon and Fabian that it shall."

She inhaled sharply.

“How could it possibly be *their* fault,” she said, “when it was *you* who ordered their deaths? They didn’t *have* to die. You didn’t *have* to kill them.”

“Oh, but I did,” said the Dark Lord. “They needed to be punished for their resistance.” He tilted his head. “Don’t you realise? They would have never stopped fighting if that punishment did not end in their deaths. ‘If an injury has to be done to a man it should be so severe that his vengeance need not be feared.’”

For a long moment, she stared at him, clutching Theodore tighter still as he snuffled, pressing his face into her chest, trying to make himself disappear.

And then, with no warning beyond a loud, startling *CRACK*, he succeeded.

Hermione’s heart stopped when her arms suddenly closed around thin air. Her shriek was piercing. She sprung to her feet to search for any sign of him, seized entirely by a thoughtless terror.

The Dark Lord made a low noise at the back of his throat.

“Impressive, but that is to be expected from a child with parents such as his,” he said, and he watched her panicked search in vague amusement for several seconds before adding, “he’s under the table.”

Within a second, she had dropped to her knees and was lifting the white tablecloth to find Theodore curled up in ball and clinging to one of the table legs, shaking profusely.

She doubted that she had ever experienced true relief until the moment he came scrambling back into her arms. She began frantically checking him for injuries, and only once she had concluded that he had not accidentally Splinched himself did she stop to catch her breath, sitting back on her heels and clutching him close as he cried.

“*Oh*, *Theodore*, *my Theodore* … It’s OK, my love,” she breathed into his hair, weeping now from her relief. “I’ve got you, you’re alright.”

“How touching,” said the Dark Lord.

She had nearly forgotten that he was there. Without letting go of Theodore, she shifted to draw her knees up and scooted back several feet until she felt one of the ferns brushing against the back of her neck.

“Are you quite done?”

She tried to remember what they had been discussing before Theodore had vanished. Stiltedly, her thoughts returned to her.

“I’d always wondered if you’d read *The Prince*.”

This confession seemed to nearly make the Dark Lord smile.

“To you, my dearest Mione, I shall admit that I have. Niccolò Machiavelli is among the few who may be deemed brilliant in my eyes. It is a pity that he should be a Muggle, just as it is, to me, beneficial.”

She wanted to keep his focus on her, lest he took it upon himself to so much as glance at Theodore. Therefore, she said, “I suppose he’s the one responsible for your preference of being feared over loved?”

“Indeed, it is better to be feared than loved. Better still, I am both, and more so, even the love, as it is perceived, is not without fear. Had you been born a weaker witch, you would be more familiar with that concept by now,” the Dark Lord added, with a sneer, “given Tavaris’ propensity to coddle you.”

Hermione scoffed faintly.

“You don’t agree?” he asked, lifting one brow.

“Tavaris is not capable of *coddling*,” she spat.

“We have both been very plain with you from the beginning … he more than I … but it is in our reasons, you see, that we really differ … His honesty derives from a desire to give you some semblance of a peace of mind, and a hopeless longing that even you, I suspect, would pity; whereas I … I only wish to incite a reaction.” To prove his point, he glanced over her head at the newest addition to the conservatory. “Wormtail is to take that off your hands later this month, so you need not fear the risk of overcrowding. It shall make for an exceptional birthday gift; Cecile Dearborn so loves to tend to her plants, especially now that they are her only company.”

He did not wait for a response before taking his leave. Clearly, he had succeeded in inciting whatever reaction he had come looking for. In the time he had been there, not once had he touched his tea.

As she sat with Theodore on the cold tiled floor, Hermione got the now familiar sense that she was the favoured prey of an animal who liked to play with his food before he ate it.

Outside the conservatory windows, the leaves kept falling. Time, in all its magnificent cruelty, brought October to a close just three weeks later.

On the morning of the thirty-first, Hermione could not find the strength to pull herself out of bed. She laid in a miserable, restless state for what seemed to simultaneously be several hours and a few fleeting seconds. At some point in the night, a sharp, shooting sensation had made a home for itself in her chest, and the pain of it left her half-fearing the possibility of a heart attack.

She squinted at the new clock on the bedside table currently on her right, its face lit up by a single chamberstick; it was precisely twenty-two minutes past eight o’clock, just as it had been the last time she had checked. Her gaze shifted to the polaroid of Sirius and Harry, then to the print of the latter’s tiny fingers and toes. So small, so simple, so perfect; it made for a devastating sight.

The door to the conjoined bathroom cracked open, releasing a slim stream of sunlight into the dim bedroom.

“Ma?”

Hermione covered her mouth with her hand, physically forcing a rising sob back down her throat. She took a rattling breath and turned over, propping herself up on one elbow to give Theodore a smile that quickly quivered and collapsed.

“Why not up?” he asked, a worried little frown on his face.

“Ma’s just a bit sleepy still,” she said, watching him pad closer, still clad in his blue pin-striped pyjamas. He put his hands up as high as they could go, and she sat up properly to heave him up onto the bed with her. “Did you get up all by yourself?”

“Dinky does it,” said Theodore, settling on his knees beside her. “Uh-cos Ma no come.”

Hermione’s eyes welled up again. “I’m so sorry, my love,” she whispered, reaching out to brush a tuft of sleep-mussed hair off his forehead. “I’m having trouble getting *myself* up today, I’m afraid.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t sleep very well last night.”

He nodded to himself. Very smartly, he informed her, “You sad uh-cos no sleep.”

The pain in her chest heightened.

“That must be it.”

“Sleep more, Ma,” Theodore instructed, patting her on the leg. He then crawled further up the bed and wriggled under the blankets with her. “An’ fabe-it ‘ings,” he added strictly.

“That will help, will it?” said Hermione, and he nodded seriously. “All right.” Sniffling, she lowered herself back down onto the pillows, laying on her side to face him. “Ready?”

He nodded again, and, tearfully, she began to sing:

“*Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens*

Bright copper kettles and warm woollen mittens

Brown paper packages tied up with strings

These are a few of my favourite things…”

The two of them remained in a lazy, half-wakeful state of rest for nearly an hour before Dinky arrived to light the room and insist upon breakfast. Regardless of their attempts to usher them into the day, Hermione and Theodore stayed right where they were; they ate from

a large tray that stood on little wooden legs over her lap, and later, had his stuffed Short-Snout and a stack of his books brought to them, still never getting out of bed unless for the bathroom. They spent the entirety of the morning in their pyjamas, reading and resting in turn, eventually joined by Crookshanks, who was more than eager to curl up in the warmth between them.

Shortly after noon, reality made its unmerciful return.

“Pa!” Theodore exclaimed in excitement, struggling to his feet atop the mattress. “Ma, it’s Pa!”

Tavaris closed the door behind himself and strode over to meet him at the foot of the bed. He wore no expression, and that alone was a bad sign.

“Good afternoon, Theodore,” he said, allowing himself to be leapt on. He swayed only for a second, holding tight to his walking-stick, before regaining his balance with Theodore in one arm. “Did you and your mother have a nice lie-in this morning?”

“Ma sad,” Theodore told him. “I say, ‘Sleep more!’ An’ ‘en fabe-it ‘ings, an’ ‘en she OK!”

“Is that right? I suppose I’m lucky that you’re here to take such good care of her for me.”

“Yes.”

Tavaris met Hermione’s gaze over Theodore’s head. Her heart was sinking before the words had even left his mouth.

“He’s waiting for you in the library.”

“Who?” asked Theodore.

“A very important, very powerful wizard,” said Tavaris, as she set aside their copy of *L’Oiseau et la Baleine*. “It wouldn’t be smart to make him wait longer than can be helped.”

“Why?”

He sighed, glancing at Hermione for assistance.

“No, Tavaris,” she said, pushing back the blankets to brace herself on the edge of the mattress. “You can be the one to explain this to him.”

Eventually, he found the right words on his own. “When a wizard is as great as this one, Theodore, his time is too valuable to be wasted. That is why your mother must go to him now.”

“Oh. Why?”

The first touch of her bare feet against the cold floor caused Hermione to recoil. She forged on, planting them firmly on the hardwood. Next came standing, and it took a nearly insurmountable amount of effort to accomplish.

Tavaris gave another sigh. Even though he had put himself in this situation, he was clearly uninterested in explaining further.

“I’ll stay with you while she’s gone,” he settled on. “Might that be enough?”

Theodore seemed to think about it for a moment. By the time she had reached the wardrobe, he was urging Tavaris to join him and Crookshanks on the bed and resume reading *L’Oiseau et la Baleine* where she had left off. As Tavaris set aside his walking-stick and they got comfortable amongst the pillows, she stared numbly at her clothes, unable to reach for any. How could she possibly decide what outfit she wanted to be wearing when Lily and James died?

In the end, Hermione pulled on her dressing gown and grabbed her slippers from the foot of the bed. She then sat down again, fisting the bluebell-patterned duvet.

“Do you know what he wants?”

Tavaris paused.

“Does it matter?” he asked, after a moment.

“I suppose not.” She took a few breaths to compose herself and returned to her feet.

“Bye, Ma!” called Theodore, when she got to the door. “I luh you!”

“I love you, too, my Theodore,” she said softly, and she forced herself from the room.

The journey to the library felt like a walk to the gallows, except, rather than being dragged by a pair of guards, Hermione was leading herself there, nonetheless resistant every step of the way. *Why?* she thought helplessly, but no one was there to tell her, so she marched on, wondering still.

He should have been someplace else, greedily consuming the sabotaging whispers of a rat and orchestrating his next move, but, for some reason, he was not. When she arrived at the top of the narrow passageway stairs, the Dark Lord was sitting at the sole table amidst the stacks upon stacks of books without a shelf to call home, looking as though nothing was out of the ordinary. The surface of the round wooden table had been cleared of all its usual oddities, and there now laid only a marble chessboard.

He gestured to the chair opposite himself.

“Sit,” he said. “I’d like to play a game with you.”

“Aren’t you already?”

He laughed, and did not deign to answer.

With trepidation, Hermione moved further into the library. As she sat down, she peered at the chessboard between them, swallowing thickly. Of all the many awful things he could have

wanted from her that day, this was the last she could have predicted, and that made it somehow worse.

“White moves first,” the Dark Lord prompted.

“If it did, we wouldn’t be here right now,” she replied, but she sent one of her knights to the frontlines all the same.

He ordered one of his pawns forward by, mysteriously, a single marble square, and the match had commenced.

“You seem exceptionally beaten today. What happened to your optimism?” he asked, with a playfulness meant to provoke. “Do not tell me it’s already dead.”

“You told me my first day here that you didn’t have the time to wait for me to lose hope,” said Hermione, as she studied her pieces carefully. “You said, ‘Gryffindors, I’ve learnt, do not do so quickly.’ And now you want me to be optimistic again? Knight to D4.”

“I did not know then that it would be so entertaining. Pawn to E5.” As his pawn moved out of the encroaching white knight’s reach, he added, “Nor that you could be both hopeful and obedient at once.”

“How come? It’s no different with your followers,” she pointed out. “We spoke of love and fear when we discussed Machiavelli; well, their love is tied to their hope, and their obedience is the product of their fear. Hopefulness and obedience, when combined, are means of survival.”

“And yet … you have lost your optimism.”

In a matter of three moves, her knight was smashed to smithereens by another of his pawns, which had only been waiting for it to come close enough to catch. Gritting her teeth, she tried to remember all the strategies Ron had taught her when it came to chess and took out a pawn of her own, creating a path for her bishop.

“Despite what I tell you, this loss does please me,” the Dark Lord continued, sounding, strangely, very nearly candid. “Although not quite for the reasons you may think. In the simplest of terms, your lack of optimism is a sign.”

“Of what?” she asked, without looking up.

“That I am *winning*,” he said, and then, rather than taking out one of her precariously positioned pieces, he called forth yet another pawn.

The match stretched on painstakingly long, until Hermione felt she had too many pieces out in the open and was nevertheless itching to use her queen. Still, the Dark Lord only played with his pawns, watching in delighted anticipation as she squirmed. From the second she had sat down, she had known perfectly well that she was going to lose — to believe otherwise would be a delusion — however, that did not mean she was willing to go down without a fight.

He chuckled deeply when her queen finally made her way onto the battlefield, and again, when her time there ended abruptly with his bishop's dagger in her chest after she had gotten too close to the other side of the board.

Ultimately and inevitably, this match ended in the Dark Lord's favour, with the very pawn that he had started out with. He did not say, "Checkmate," for he did not have to. She knew that she had lost.

Tilting his head to one side, he asked curiously, "Do you know how I knew you would lose to me before we even began this game?"

Hermione said nothing, for she did not have to. He answered the question himself.

"Because *you* knew. Because you have proven yourself to be someone who does not wish to tempt fate, nor fight it. Your obedience is not merely a product of fear or a means of survival; it is evidence that you are someone who allows what is meant to be … to be."

The Dark Lord's lips twitched, and slowly, they crept into a smirk, before finally forming a grin that made her every muscle go taut with fear.

"And *that*, you stupid girl, is the reason that I have never asked you why, on the same day you turned up at Hogwarts, the shattered remains of a Time-Turner were found on Harold Minchum's desk."

Chapter End Notes

Oh, how I cannot wait to read your comments...

Do bear in mind that, as is the case with writing legislation, I know very little about chess. I stared at a chessboard for a long time writing this. I don't think it helped.

Lee & Snyde: these are the imprisoned Death Eater parents of characters in Hogwarts Mystery, Barnaby Lee and Merula Snyde. There's not much information on them; I'm just running with it.

The Fault of a Fool

Chapter Summary

> Oh, look what you've done
> You've made a fool of everyone
> Oh, well, it seems like such fun
> Until you lose what you had won
> — Look What You've Done, Jet

Chapter Notes

> CW: Major Character Death(s).
>
> IMPORTANT: I have edited all chapters prior to this, bettering them and fixing plot-holes — the one change you need to know is Hermione left the future Monday, 2 November 2020 and arrived back in time Wednesday, 2 November 1977. I had messed up the timeline of the Cursed Child; in it, she and the others were present for Halloween of '81.
>
> Lastly, this chapter contains a few quotes from Ch.16, Through the Trapdoor, of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone. All rights go to JKR, obviously.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Dark Lord laughed, high and cold.

"It was wise of you to wipe his memory, I shall grant you that much," he said, "but ultimately useless when you were so stupid as to not properly dispose of the remaining evidence! So simple, it was … so *perfect* … I almost believed you *wanted* me to find you."

Hermione had gone very still, her mind cleared of all thought. She did not even know if her heart was still beating.

Everything beyond the library walls had fallen away, until there existed only this one room, this one moment, and this one person before her, for whom time, impatient, propelled onwards without her, a blur of movement and speech.

"You see, upon awakening in a daze to find his desk littered with flakes of gold and the indigo grains of Time Sand, Minchum did not summon an Auror — rather, it was a pair of Unspeakables whom he sent for. Might you be able to guess which ones?"

Rookwood.

"*Yes*," the Dark Lord hissed, with relish, even though she had not spoken. "I have been aware of your knowledge of his identity ever since the night Severus shared with everyone the contents of Sybil Trelawney's prophecy. What the very sight of Rookwood sparked in you! I recall you nearly screamed from the fright!

"He was not the only one who answered Minchum's summons, however; Rookwood came in with Dorcas Meadowes. It was a dual effort that they deduced what had taken place in the Minister's office just moments before, and my faithful Rookwood, forever proving himself to be a forward-thinker, was quick to Stun his partner and dispose of the remaining evidence on your behalf. Both Minchum and Miss Meadowes were Obliviated.

"In time, the latter did come close to rediscovering the event, to her credit and, of course … her detriment …" At this, he smirked, luxuriating in his own humour and in his ability to flood both space and sense with his presence, his body extended in a lordly lounge. "Her final project, you see, was an experimental potion designed to uncover that which had previously been stolen from one's mind. I had no choice but to rid us all of her before she could succeed. That is not the point of this story, however … The point is that in no more than a couple of hours since you landed in that office, Rookwood had delivered the news of a potential time-traveller in our midst directly to *me*."

The Dark Lord now gave Hermione a grin full of teeth; it was a horrid sight, erupting with euphoria and the promise of pain.

"*A day*," he leant in to whisper. "That was all it took to find you. A single day, and Angus Mulciber had written home to his father about a new student in Gryffindor House who had single-handedly bested him and his cohort in a duel."

It was in a voice dripping with condescension that he continued. "Do you realise how rare it is to enrol in school for a single and final year after having previously received no formal education? And rarer still, to have done so two months into a new term? The last time Hogwarts acquired a new student who was beyond their first year was in October of nineteen-forty, when special arrangements were made for a half-blood wizard of thirteen who had been home-schooled prior to that point, and whose magical relatives had been lost to Grindelwald's regime — and his filthy Muggle father, to the German army in the Battle of Britain. As for a *witch* … no such case has ever been recorded in all the years since Hogwarts first opened its doors. Not until you.

"From that day on, although only Rookwood knew the reason for it beyond my mere interest to learn more, I had every child of my followers and likewise supporters keeping watch on you … The Avery and Mulciber boys, their friends Severus Snape and the late Ivan Wilkes, the youngest Lestrange, Barty Crouch Jr, the late Evan Rosier and Regulus Black, and even the Parkinson girl, Preciosa … Every token of information they obtained was reported to their point of contact, and then passed on to me. A code was developed; the mention of one's proximity to a dense forest. It is, after all, the meaning of the surname *Greenwood* … Although, you would not have likely known that, would you, as that has never *really* been your surname."

At some point, Hermione became aware that she was shaking. Her hands gripped the arms of the chair for support, her body posed for action yet stuck in that one spot, as if she were thirteen years old again and had been left Petrified by the yellow gaze of a massive snake.

She had never been at such a loss as for what to do. In fact, she did not think there was anything she could do. All she had left was her continued silence, but as the Dark Lord went on, she began to fear this strategy could no longer help her.

He already knew too much.

"'*Dear Bella*,'" he recited, in a curt, coolly indifferent voice she took to be a mockery of Regulus'; "'*I had a thought the other day, whilst reading out by the Forbidden Forest. Polyjuice is known for its difficulty, is it not? Even the seventh years, who I heard are studying it now, struggle with the brewing process. Imagine the talent someone would have to possess in order to brew it successfully at thirteen, purely out of curiosity …*'"

Her mind travelled back to the day in the Hogwarts library that she had shared this information with Remus; down the aisle, Regulus had unwillingly drawn their attention by dropping a book.

The next imitation was deep and gruff. "'*Father; You have always told me not to hesitate when it comes to obtaining the things I want. Well, I took your advice. After Slughorn's dinner party on Saturday, I brought the girl I fancy on a late-night stroll along the edge of the Forest and, wouldn't you know, it turns out witches like her are more than able to resist my charm.*'"

The Dark Lord tilted his head back with his next bout of mirth; apparently, the thought of the Imperius Curse having been cast on her to get her on her knees was terribly amusing.

"Not only were you so prone to loudly establishing your presence but you excelled in most everything you did," he said gleefully, "effectively demolishing the painstakingly earned class ranks of your peers. By the end of December, even Horace Slughorn was reporting on you! He did not know it, the poor fool; I am sure, in his mind, he believed that he was doing you a favour when he wrote to Tavaris about his talented new pupil. He had, he shared, been hoping to introduce the two of you at his little Christmas soirée that year, and he was terribly put out that Abraxas and Edmund had attended alone.

"In his letter, Slughorn set out to convince Tavaris that becoming your mentor would be to his benefit as much as yours. He claimed that you would thrive under his tutelage, and even went as far as to compare your work to that of a scholar. '*If I did not know any better,*' he said, '*I would think Mione had already sat her N.E.W.T.s.*' It is this, more than anything, which brought me to the conclusion that you had … But Slughorn did not stop there; onto that piece of parchment, he spat out everything from your blood status to the length of your most recent essay, and he also confirmed what I had recently been informed of by Rabastan … that is, that your late parents had been researchers for a private potions company …"

His voice had dipped low, his words gliding smoothly off his tongue the way they so often did when he recognised their full weight and was eager to see someone be crushed under it.

Hermione cringed at her own ignorance, realising what he planned to drop on her before he did.

"As it occurs, the Director of the European Potions Trade and Distribution Company bears my Mark, and not Theomund Nott nor anyone else involved in the business of potions in Europe has ever employed or worked alongside a witch or wizard by the name of Greenwood. I then knew for certain that I had my time-traveller."

Professor Dumbledore had warned her not to assign careers to her fictional parents.

"Still nothing to say?" the Dark Lord taunted. "It is no matter. I have plenty to share myself."

He leaned back in his chair again, his bone-white hands resting on the wooden arms, empty. Obviously, he did not think this confrontation required a drawn wand, even if only to serve as a reminder. He had faith now that she need not be threatened to obey.

"Where was I? Ah, yes, Slughorn's heartfelt request for a mentorship … He provided quite an exceptional opportunity for us with that. Alas, I had received word that you were already being mentored, and by *Albus Dumbledore* himself. I had no doubt Dumbledore knew of your origins; to have wound up at Hogwarts so swiftly, there is little chance that you did not tell him. I decided that to reach out at that time would be unwise. I instructed Tavaris to hold off on writing to you. I waited … I had preparations made for your arrival … and, when the term neared its end, I had Gaspar Avery offer you a choice. As you may have since realised, you chose wrong."

At long last, Hermione spoke.

"I didn't."

He appeared pleased that she had decided to play this next game with him.

"You do not think so? Not even now?"

"I told you three years ago in the Malfoys' parlour, and I will tell you again today — I will never join you."

His grin returned in its full menacing capacity.

"You won't ever stop, will you?" he said brightly. "Not even once you have lost! I must say, I would find your ability to be both brilliant and brainless incredibly annoying if it were not so superbly helpful." He gave his head a soft shake, relinquishing his amusement with a sigh. "Above all, though, it is your dedication to avoiding disrupting the timeline as you know it that has benefited me; this dedication, which you made clear that day you speak of. It is why you were so afraid when you first laid eyes on Tavaris. Not because you truly feared him … no … but because you feared what his presence meant … You feared an alteration to the timeline, because you did not yet know your own fate … You did not know you would turn out to be the mother of one of your schoolmates."

This time, Hermione's jaw dropped. It was not purely shock that gripped her, though; terror, too, had her in its icy grasp.

"Oh, yes," said the Dark Lord, with clear pleasure, "I have figured that out as well. Shall I explain how?"

Without waiting for the response that she doubted her current capability of giving, he proceeded to do precisely that.

"It was your reaction to seeing Gideon and Fabian Prewett that did it. In these past three years, you have found all manner of people on that doorstep … ones who belong to me, and ones who do not … but none have inspired such strong emotions as those two did. Granted, you collapsed screaming after seeing Bellatrix for the first time, but you made it to your bedroom first; you held it together whilst you had an audience. Antonin Dolohov, you outright attacked, but you made it through nearly the entire meal before snapping. Certainly, Alastor Moody gave you pause, according to the memory I obtained from Rodolphus, and you lost your temper with Eamon Travers, but from both you recovered quickly. And as for Wormtail, I am told you were cold with him from the moment you met, yet able to interact with him daily all the same … None of them made you flee, and especially not ignore your son's cries for comfort. None of them had you bursting into tears at the mere sight of their faces …

"I asked myself, why, of all people, the Prewett twins? I had them looked in to … their friends and their parents … their sister … Molly Weasley had recently given birth to the sixth ginger runt of her large litter. Curiously, you had baked a birthday cake on the same day he was born, and, as Gaspar's memories revealed, before you had even seen the *Prophet*'s announcement … *Ronald Bilius Weasley* … I thought, was Bilius not the name of the red-haired Muggle boy I had seen in so many of your memories? And it was."

She shook her head helplessly, her eyes welling up.

He clicked his tongue. "Now, now, don't do that," he chided. "We both know my theories are substantial enough that to deny them at this point would accomplish nothing."

"But — *but these are just guesses*!" spluttered Hermione, and her heart, she now knew, was indeed beating — racing, in fact. "Theory does not constitute fact; you cannot possibly prove anything based on —"

The Dark Lord raised a hand to cut her off before she could make an even bigger fool out of herself.

"I may not yet know your name, but I *do* know you. I know that at Hogwarts, you felt most comfortable surrounded by witches and wizards like the Potters, the Longbottoms, Remus Lupin, Sirius Black, Marlene McKinnon, that Mudblood Macdonald, and the Abbott girl who ran off to marry some crackpot journalist called Lovegood. I know that the pitifully small ring you arrived with came from a boy named Ronald Weasley, who was born on the first of March last year. I know that to have been placed in Gryffindor House when you came here increases the likelihood that you were also Sorted there the first time, and that this likelihood is further increased by the fact that you were so close to a boy whose family has been Sorted

there for generations, which, together, tells me that you will be among the entering class of first years in the year *nineteen-ninety-one*! Also meant to start at Hogwarts that year are young Theodore and Draco Malfoy, as well as Neville Longbottom and Harry Potter, who, if you were indeed in Gryffindor, I imagine you would have also been close to, which would explain why you were so comfortable in the company of their parents. *I know who you are*."

Once more, she could only stare at him in petrified horror.

"It was *your* idea that I should have Orvyn Shacklebolt killed instead of his pregnant wife!" he went on victoriously. "I do not believe it would be much of a stretch to say that his son, born the October before last, was yet another friend of yours! Will Dean Thomas be in Gryffindor, too, like the father you ensured he will never know the name of? The Abbott girl is rumoured to have given birth this past February. Might that child have also been a friend to you?"

He stood up from his chair to pace beside the table, fully immersed in his tale, and half-crazed in his triumph.

"I could hardly be surprised when the loyalties of Regulus Black came to light, soft on him as you were! I asked you, do you recall, if I had to worry about him? You told me that he took after his cousin Narcissa. Tell me again, should I be questioning her loyalties as well? All I need do is summon either Abraxas or Lucius to fetch her, I could have her here in a matter of minutes —"

"No!" Hermione practically shrieked.

The Dark Lord came forth to slam his hands atop the table, making her jump. He leaned in far too close, his gaze far too eager.

"*No*?"

"I didn't mean they were alike in their loyalties, not in that way, *I already told you*!" she cried, looking up at him in desperation. "It's in the familial sense! *I told you this*. Narcissa is loyal to the Malfoys the same way Regulus was loyal to the Blacks — *and the Malfoys are loyal to you*!"

His lips twitched.

"Yes. That is the conclusion I reached myself, even before I asked you the first time. *Reactions*!" he exclaimed elatedly, as a sob wrenched itself from her heaving chest. "I did tell you I enjoy inciting them. They are, as I once said, like a Four-Point Spell. I knew the prophecy was more than the silly ramblings of a half-drunk witch with no prospects just from the way the blood *drained* from your face when Severus shared it. It's why I wanted you there in the first place — why I made sure you would be seated next to Rookwood, so he, too, could watch for every flinch, every twitch of an eye, every sharp intake of breath — and, *oh*, how you exceeded even *our* expectations … Do you understand now, why I am so fond of you?"

He dipped lower to whisper in her ear, his cheekbone grazing her temple like ice melting on skin.

"You are one of my most prized possessions … My loyal little compass, never to lead me astray lest you face the risk of forsaking all that you know and love … even if it means you must forsake some part of yourself in the process."

It was too much to take in all at once. Hermione could scarcely breathe from the overwhelm.

When the Dark Lord moved away, he did not go far, keeping his face directly in front of her own.

"I had you accompany me to two different homes last July. Have you managed to figure out why?"

Squeezing her eyes shut, she shook her head, her face twisted with pain. A second later, she felt the brush of his breath.

"Because if you were indeed in Gryffindor, in the same year that the names *Neville Longbottom* and *Harry Potter* have been put down for, I suspect you would have been close to whichever one of them made it to Hogwarts … Perhaps you even visited them over the holidays, where you might have gotten to know their parents well enough to be comfortable around their adolescent selves … Remind me, which house did you immediately recognise?"

It hit her like a punch to the throat. Hermione reared back so forcefully that the chair nearly tipped over.

"Stop it. *Please*, *stop*!"

But he did not.

"I knew then, who the prophecy must refer to."

Shaking harder than ever, she gave him an imploring look, silently begging him to say no more.

The Dark Lord straightened back up to tower over her at his full height. He then spent another moment merely letting his eyes rove over her face, as though there was still something there that he had yet to discover. Finally, say more, he did.

"The home of the Potter family can be found at Number Seven Church Lane, Godric's Hollow."

The noise that escaped Hermione was inhuman.

"*No*!" she gasped, doubling over in pain. Tears were streaming down her face. "You can't tell me that, you can't, *you're not the Secret-Keeper*!"

"That may be so," he said, "but you have made it abundantly clear that you come from a time in which my followers must no longer be forced to hide. How else would you recognise

them? How else would you know to despise them and fear them for crimes they have not yet committed? *You hate Wormtail because the secret of the Potters' location already exists in your head from a time when it was not a secret at all*!" He released a large exhale, and with it, a derogatory breath of laughter. "That is why I can tell you. Once again, your reactions lay all your secrets bare."

As he swept smoothly back to his seat on the other side of the round table, she folded herself in half, clutching her head and sobbing into her knees.

No, she thought in despair, again and again, until the word began to lose meaning.

"I have other theories as well," the Dark Lord revealed after a while, in a tone suggestive of light conversation. "I imagine that some aspects of your story are true … that you did spend at least your early childhood in the Muggle world … that your parents are indeed blood traitors, and yourself, of pure blood, though not in faith nor practise. I do not believe you to possess the audacity one must in order to pose as such were you not, so as I do not believe you could have come here from a world under my own guidance having been fully educated and equipped with the knowledge required to assist the elder Bartemius Crouch in drafting his Bill beseeching of force had you been less than, at the very least, a half-blood.

"I have, in my mind, the image of a young pure-blood witch, who is perhaps nineteen, perhaps twenty … and whose given name is close enough to the one you go by here for it to unnerve you every time I say it … I imagine this witch is betrothed to Ronald Weasley rather than wed, as the latter would require consummation, and according to what Tavaris has shared … consummation certainly did not occur … I also imagine that she works for my reformed Ministry of Magic, possibly in Wizengamot Registration Services, or in the Department of Mysteries, which might explain how you came into possession of such a powerful time-travel device — or even in Magical Law Enforcement, considering you knew enough about the Auror training program to use its protocol to heckle my young followers in your duel — while at the same time she quietly loathes the system that she's been made a part of, and lies in wait for the first opportunity to fight back against it, unleashing her inner-radical … Perhaps, secretly, she already fights back … Am I close? No, do not answer that," he added swiftly; "in time, I shall find out for myself."

There was absolutely no relief in the revelation that he did not really know everything; he knew enough, and true to his word, in time, he would learn the rest.

One's proximity to a dense forest — it was also the meaning of her original surname. In all the time that he had known her to be Hermione Granger, the Dark Lord had known, too, that she was also Mione Greenwood Nott. He had probably known from the very first time Professor Quirinus Quirrell had taken the register for his first-year Defence Against the Dark Arts class in 1991, when he had been living as a parasite on the back of Quirrell's head.

How enraging the Dark Lord must have found it when he had learned that her parents were really Muggles, and how entertaining, when she had attached herself to none other than Harry Potter.

She heard him shift on his seat but could not tell whether he meant to stand again or not, unwilling to lift her head for a glimpse. Soon, she felt his hand stroking her hair.

“I am telling you all of this now to express my gratitude.”

She had thought it might be because he planned to kill her. For a second, she might have even hoped for it.

The Dark Lord’s voice was soft, not outright venomous, but most assuredly, a silent poison. “What is about to happen could never have if it were not for you. Lord Voldemort thanks you for your service.”

With those last words, he drifted away. The sound of his footfalls as he descended the passageway stairs marked the end of this final confrontation, and so the commencing of another.

In his wake, he had left Hermione a token of sorts. On the chessboard, a small figurine of a swaddled infant crafted from white marble had taken the place of the defeated king, and on the square of the black pawn to have done the deed, there now stood a carving of her own likeness.

With a gutted scream, she upended the entire board.

It felt to her as though she had lived through an eternity of misery in the blink of an eye by the time she heard the wary ascension of a walking-stick, and even then, Hermione could not escape it.

Still folded on the chair, her shaking arms were extended over her bowed head to maintain a white-knuckled grip on the rim of the table, and thus, keep herself from collapsing on the carpet. The piercing compression in her chest could not be compared to the now inconsiderable sharp shooting that had kept her awake through the night; this new pain, she was almost positive, really was a heart attack.

Her heart certainly felt as if it were under siege.

What Tavaris thought had happened, she had no idea, but it must have been something wretched if the *thuds* had stopped at the top of the stairs several moments ago, and had not resumed since.

A single thought continued to ring shrilly within her head.

All my fault.

And the fact of the matter was that this always had been, and always would be, unchangeable. There could be no solace found in the deliberate convincing of oneself that, perhaps, the consequences which they had set upon others would not be as harsh as their imagination suggested, not when she had already been there to witness those consequences herself.

Harry, eleven years old, and drowning in his own distressed clothes; thirteen, and drifting numbly down from his dormitory with the sounds of his parents’ final moments replaying on a loop in his head; fourteen, and receiving packages of food from his friends with which to better sustain himself over the summer; fifteen, and cracking jokes about his uncle and the

importance of having a good sense of when to duck, and later, charging, unprepared, into a battle over a prophecy which ended in the taking of his godfather's life; seventeen, and giving up his own life because that, of all things, was what he had been chosen for; and then, twenty-four, and writing a list of potential baby names that consisted entirely of those of the people whom he had scarcely had the chance to love before losing.

Hermione had been the catalyst for it all.

At that moment, no one across both time and space could have despised her more than she already did herself.

All my fault, she thought again, and then she discovered that she was repeating it aloud, through wails that had her choking on her own spit. "*All m—my fault*, *all my fault*, *it's all my f—f—fault*!"

Tavaris finally gathered the courage to approach her about the same time that her arms gave out; he caught her around the waist and yanked her back onto the seat of the chair before she could fully leave it.

"Mione," he started, and it seemed he was incapable of saying anything beyond that.

"*He's going to kill them*, *Tavaris* … He's going to kill the P—P—Potters!" Hermione sobbed. "*And I did it*! I m—made it happen!"

He was quiet, his posture stiff and stooped. She clutched the arm that held her as though it were a lifeline.

"I can—can't *do this* anymore! *I can't live like this*! Make it s—st—stop! *Please*! *I'm tired*! *Make it stop*!"

This, at the very, very least, yet equally the most, Tavaris was able to do; in less than a couple of minutes, he was holding her jaw open to pour a liquid of pure, calming relief in her mouth, then covering half her face with his hand to help her swallow it. The last drops were still trickling down her throat when a second, dank-smelling potion was brought to her lips, and the contents of this one were so great that it seemed to take ages to fully consume. Once she had, the first — a Calming Draught — was already kicking in.

Her cries ceased, her sobs softened, and then Hermione was breathing again.

"I may be at risk of developing an addiction," she said several minutes later, in little more than a croak.

Tavaris let out a mirthless huff as he waved his wand to dispose of the two empty glass bottles on the table. He tucked it away in his pocket before leaning back and regarding her tiredly.

"I will withhold them from you should it ever come to that," he promised.

Slouched limply in the chair, she watched him flex his jaw and glance around them at the rest of the library, lingering on the chess pieces still scattered about the floor. It took him a

moment to voice his inquiry.

“What did he want?”

“I thought it didn’t matter.”

He waited.

“To play chess, obviously.”

“What happened?”

“I lost.”

Tavaris breathed in deeply. “And I presume he left in high spirits?” he said. “He seemed happy when he came to speak with me after, but that could have just been his excitement for tonight.”

“Oh, he was happy,” said Hermione, in a dull voice. She sniffled, wiping her eyes on the back of her hand. “He even thanked me for my service.”

He gave a small start.

“What?”

Her elbow slipped twice before settling on the arm of the chair; she propped her head up on her hand and, through half-lidded eyes, studied Tavaris in a new light.

“Do you know how I first caught the Dark Lord’s interest?”

“You made a mockery out of his newest recruits,” he said, almost dismissively, a crease forming at his brow. “Worse, by defending a Mudblood’s honour.”

She frowned at him. “Don’t call her that. She’s going to die in a few hours.”

“James Potter will, certainly, but Lily Potter — has he not told you? The Dark Lord plans to offer her mercy on Severus’ behalf; all she need do is step aside —”

“If it were me, and he meant to kill Theodore, do you think I would ever step aside, Tavaris?”

She saw his throat move as he swallowed. Perhaps he paled a bit, too, but even before she had spoken his face had appeared quite colourless.

With jittery haste, he discarded the question, reverting to her initial one.

“Why are you asking me about this? Why now — when it occurred almost four years ago to the day?”

“He said Professor Slughorn wrote to you about me.”

“He did, yes,” said Tavaris, looking increasingly agitated. “But Dumbledore was already trying to recruit you himself, so it would’ve been entirely senseless of me to follow through with his request. Either way, it supports our story of a pre-existing correspondence.”

“Is that all?”

He clenched and unclenched his jaw, his fingers curling around the rim of the table on either side of him.

“Your performance during the first term may have succeeded in catching the Dark Lord’s attention,” he said, “but it wasn’t until Slughorn’s letter that I believe his true interest began. He was sure about you then. I thought … well, I thought you were as much a boon for Bellatrix as you were for myself. Beyond that, I couldn’t see what you could do to directly benefit him apart from join and contribute to the cause.”

Hermione’s frown deepened.

“Do you mean to say that, even if I’d agreed, the plan had always been to pass me off to you?”

Tavaris looked away.

“If you had joined, you would have had access to more freedoms, and you would have been studying under myself. The opportunity for greater knowledge — that is what he offered you. But …” His gaze firmly on the mess of chess pieces, he gave a jerky nod. “Yes. Yes, your presence here has always been intended to provide me an heir, in addition to a companion for Bellatrix. I suppose I should’ve known then, given your similarities …” He trailed off, clenching his jaw again.

She concluded that he did not know the same secrets that the Dark Lord and Rookwood did. Tavaris was a smooth talker, an even smoother liar, and right now, he had the potential to be described as downright twitchy.

“Let us return to your bedroom,” he said abruptly, straightening up off the table, “so Dinky may run you a bath.”

Hermione nodded against the palm of her hand, and admitted, “I may need assistance; I can’t entirely feel my legs anymore.”

Travel occurred in increments when there were two people in need of support and only one walking-stick between them. When she and Tavaris re-entered her bedroom roughly ten minutes later, Theodore was sat atop the four-poster bed in fresh pyjamas — a white set covered in little suns, from the Macmillans — and looking as though he had been given a bath of his own. At the sight of his parents, he abandoned what had appeared to be a deeply serious one-sided conversation with Crookshanks and struggled down the side of the bed to run to them.

“Theodore,” Tavaris said, stopping him with a stern tone. “Your mother is still very tired. She will re-join you after she’s washed up —”

Dinky, who had been fluffing the pillows, took this as an order and hustled into the ensuite —

"— but she will need to rest, so do not be upset if she doesn't read to you again this afternoon. Do you understand?"

With wide, worried eyes, Theodore glanced at Hermione and back. "Ma sad still?" he asked.

She didn't know whether that question should be answered honestly or not.

"Fabe-it 'ings, Ma," he told her earnestly, "'member?" He started singing. "*Feelin' sad, 'member my fabe-it 'ings, an' 'en I 'on' feel so bad*!"

Even whilst she was hopped up on a combination of calm- and peace-inducing remedies like a 1950s' suburban housewife with a penchant for popping pharmaceuticals, this precious attempt to cheer her up made her heart feel weak. She smiled softly.

"You're right, my love," she murmured. "I'll feel better once I remember my favourite things, starting with you."

This confused rather than comforted Theodore, because, as he proceeded to point out, he was not actually in the song. Dinky then poked their head out from the ensuite to report that the bath had been drawn, however, and Tavaris ended the conversation by instructing Theodore to wait while he escorted her there.

Due to the numbness of her fingers, Hermione had to let Dinky be the one to wash her hair, and later, pull her nightgown over her head and stuff her arms into its linen sleeves. She did a sloppy job scrubbing her face in the sink and an even sloppier one brushing her teeth, but she had done, and that was what mattered. When she exited to sway over to the four-poster, she was clean, and the beauty of the Calming Draught combined with the Draught of Peace made her feel clean too.

Tavaris was gone, but Theodore was back on the bed, laying with Crookshanks firmly planted on his chest as though to keep him from running off. He moved only once she had joined them.

"Sleep now?" Theodore asked her, rolling over to sit himself up. He grinned, half-sheepish and half-mischievous, and whipped a book out from behind him. "O' '*Oiseau et Ballet*?"

"*L'Oiseau et la Baleine*," Hermione corrected, leaning forwards whilst Dinky propped up her pillows. She thanked them before leaning back with a yawn and rubbing her eyes. "Didn't you finish it with Pa?"

"Er — no?"

"You needn't lie; we can read it again."

"Oh. Yes." Grinning once more, he hastened up the bed to make a spot for himself. He then fumbled the book onto her lap.

“It was your cousin Delany’s idea to give you this book, you know,” she told him, opening it to the first page. “For your very first Christmas.”

Theodore looked befuddled.

“He was the youngest in the family before you came along. I know you don’t remember meeting him; you were just a baby back then.” Hermione paused, stuck on this thought and all whom it applied to, but then he tapped the book to remind her what she ought to be doing, and, dismissing it, she began to read.

She didn’t make it past the third page before falling asleep.

Dazedly, Hermione dreamt of another board of checkered marble, whose pieces dwarfed the true players of the game: three children who were, for the first time of what would be many, knowingly positioning themselves against what sought to harm them.

“That’s chess! You’ve got to make some sacrifices! I take one step forward and she’ll take me — that leaves you to checkmate the king, Harry!”

She could have sworn her own scream at the knight’s collapse followed her even as she woke, bleary-eyed and a bit lost, to drink from something at her lips — another dose of the Draught of Peace, she thought vaguely, before slipping back into her dream, finding herself now in front of a long line of colourful concoctions.

A riddle.

“Harry — you’re a great wizard, you know.”

“I’m not as good as you.”

“Me! Books! And cleverness! There are more important things — friendship and bravery and — oh, Harry — be careful!”

This time, it was her worried weeping at their parting of ways which accompanied her into consciousness; her lashes brushed wetly against the skin beneath her eyes as she blinked, beckoned back to the present.

On the opposite side of the four-poster, Theodore was fast asleep on his father’s lap, *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* laying open on his own to the story of Babbity Rabbity and her ridiculous, utterly unrealistic stump. Tavaris had a book open, too, only he was awake, and it was the sort that didn’t come with pictures of woodland creatures and cackling, chopped-up trees.

As Hermione watched, Tavaris glanced from his book to the bedside table behind her. He did so thrice more before he noticed her eyes on him. Without marking the page, he set his book aside. She peered at the cover, recognising it not as a book but as a journal from a past Nott, although she did not know which one.

“How do you feel?”

She suspected her internal organs had turned themselves inside out while she had slept.

“Calm,” she whispered.

Tavaris gave her a shrewd look.

“Good,” he whispered back. Apparently unable to stop himself, his gaze lifted once more, and she realised that he was looking at the clock.

Like the first droplets of rain, apprehension pattered lightly onto her skin.

“How late is it?”

A muscle twitched in his jaw.

“Later than I’d expected.”

Distantly, Hermione wondered what he was going to do when he found out that not all had gone according to plan that night. She could not imagine his reaction would be one for which she wanted to be anywhere within arm’s reach.

Tavaris released his sigh carefully, forcibly tearing his eyes from the clock.

“I know this has been hard on you, darling,” he murmured quietly, “but it will be over soon. Do yourself a favour: let this fight run its course. Peace cannot be achieved until war is first won.”

“Peace for whom?” she asked, curious.

“For the people, of course,” he said. “Whom else?”

“We have very different definitions of the word, *people*.”

Before he could say anything to this, a shrill voice reached their ears, distant but growing closer with each second.

Her spine stiffened, and Hermione began to sit up, reaching for Theodore at the same time that Tavaris moved to lift him from his lap. The potion-induced peace lingered in her bloodstream, she knew, but even so, she wrapped Theodore up in her arms with a protectiveness that spoke of feelings far from calm.

“Ma?” he mumbled groggily, as Tavaris hurried to put his loafers back on, his unblinking gaze on the door.

As gently as one could do anything with haste, Hermione made a shushing noise and coaxed Theodore to rest his head in the crook of her neck. She threaded her fingers through his hair so that, whilst she soothed him, she could also stop him from looking up.

Tavaris had regained his walking-stick and was halfway across the room when the voice became too close to be held back.

"*Out of my way, you stupid —*"

The door was thrown open with a shuddering *BANG* that caused Theodore to jolt, and in burst Bellatrix, with Dinky scrambling in a second after her.

"Dinky — Dinky tries, Master," they panted, hunching over with their hands on their knobbly knees, "but she is being too fa—fast —"

Bellatrix shoved in front of them.

"He has not returned," she told Tavaris, breathless herself. "I have waited hours. *Hours*! He still has not returned! Not Wormtail, not even Pyrites, and they went with him!"

Hermione could see only Tavaris' back, but when he spoke, his voice took on the authoritative tone that it had when he had been sending Regulus, Barty, and the Lestranges off like a troop of soldiers to kill the wife of Orvyn Shacklebolt.

"At what time did they leave?"

"Just after dark," said Bellatrix. "Within the hour, *he told me he would be back within the hour*! I have half a mind to track the place down myself!"

"You would never find it while the Fidelius Charm is still up," said Tavaris dismissively, turning and taking a step to the right as though intending to pace. That single step was all he took, however; he faced her again. "I assume you've tried summoning him?"

"Of course, I have! A dozen times! Do you think I would be here if it had worked?"

Now that he had shifted, Hermione could see the focus on his face, as well as the harsh working of his jaw. Theodore made a fearful, questioning noise and tried to lift his head; without looking away from Tavaris, she pressed it back down, shushing him again. Slowly, she shifted out of the bed — better to stand than to sit.

"And he was accompanied by Wormtail and Pyrites?"

"Wormtail went to confirm the location, and it was Pyrites whose job it was to give warning if someone from the Order decided to show up — but Wormtail would hardly linger, would he," Bellatrix added darkly, sneering, "knowing the second he hears my foul *freak* of a cousin will be after him."

In a split-second decision, Tavaris snapped at Dinky, "Get Abraxas, Edmund, and Geoffrey here — now."

Still catching their breath, Dinky nodded; they had barely Disapparated when Tavaris summoned Goppy from Nottingham Hall and, with the same urgency, ordered him to hunt down Argo Pyrites and bring him there by whatever means necessary.

"*Ma*," Theodore whispered uneasily. "Wha'appens?"

Hermione backed them into the corner nearest the ensuite; the single unblocked exit was on the other side of the bed, and she did not want Bellatrix to take notice and remember they were there.

“Why Pa mad?”

“Shh, my love. Pa isn’t mad; he’s just scared. But you’ve got to be quiet now — as quiet as you can, all right?”

“But why Pa —?”

“Theodore. *I need you to be quiet*.”

Her voice was frightening enough that he was.

“… intercepted by the Order, you don’t think?” Bellatrix was speaking rapidly, shifting restlessly on the spot. The hand that was not gripping her wand had the dark curls at the back of her head bunched in a fist. “Perhaps it is Dumbledore holding him up! Yes! They could be duelling and — and the Dark Lord may only be waiting for us to come to his aide — to fight at his side —”

“Then he would summon us, Bellatrix, you know this.”

“BUT WHAT IF HE CANNOT?” she screamed, and suddenly, she seemed to shrink. Her eyes began to water, her voice dropping to an incredibly fragile whisper. “*What if he cannot*?”

“Concern yourself with his well-being all you like,” Tavaris said, through gritted teeth, as he leaned against the doorframe with his elbow, clutching his forehead, “but do not do him the disservice of questioning his strength.”

Once more, Bellatrix became enraged. “You think I doubt him?” she demanded. “That I doubt his power?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake —”

“*I HAVE FAITH IN HIM GREATER THAN ANYONE*!”

In a flash, his head had shot up, and he slammed his hand against the doorframe.

“Shout at me again and see what happens!”

Stricken, Theodore scrabbled at Hermione’s shoulders, hanging on as though for dear life. His sobs, thankfully, were muffled by her neck.

“*I have stood with him since before you were even born*!”

“And yet *I* am the one who is by his side the most!”

“You think because he lets you into his bed, you’re somehow special?” said Tavaris nastily. “Like Arcturus made you special?”

Bellatrix was raising her wand when Abraxas could be heard shouting in the front hall; single-minded in their shared pursuit, she and Tavaris practically raced one another out of the bedroom, leaving the door hanging wide open.

A dozen questions sped through Hermione’s head, and they all traced back to just two: was Rookwood the only one left who knew what role she had played in this, and if so, what was he going to do about it once he heard what had happened?

Eventually, she realised that Theodore had quit being quiet. Mechanically, she approached the bed and lowered herself to kneel on the floor. She then tried to remove him gently from herself, but he refused to let go. He lifted his head to shake it at her; his face had gone all red, his eyes swollen and brimming with tears.

“Ma — *Ma*! *No* —”

“Shh, it’s all right, my love,” she whispered. “We’re going to play a little game.”

“No! Up — *up* —”

“It’s called Hide and Seek. We’re going to hide — just there, see —” Hermione pointed to the near half-foot of space beneath the four-poster, “— and we’re going to be so quiet that anyone seeking us won’t even know we’re there — OK? But we must go in one at a time or we won’t both fit.”

Choking on a sob, Theodore shot the spot a wary glance.

“Just you and me, Theodore; you and me,” she said, as she lowered them further to the floor, laying down on her stomach so he was forced to shift slightly out of her arms. She gave him a small push to slide him under the bed, then immediately shimmied herself under after him, her cheek rubbing against the frigid hardwood.

Separated from the candlelight, their sight was dimmed once they were fitted safely beneath the bedframe. Crookshanks’ yellow eyes practically glowed in the dark as he moved from his own hiding spot by the head of the bed to join them.

“Look — Crookshanks is here to keep us company!”

“*M—Ma*,” Theodore whimpered, shaking his head again.

“No, no, it’s all right — shh, deep breaths — we have to be quiet now, remember?” said Hermione, twisting her arm to reach out to him. “Feel that? That’s my hand — just keep holding my hand. I’m here; I’m not going anywhere.”

The shouting coming from the front hall suddenly peaked, and she could just make out someone’s yell of, “*Pyrites*!”

“How about we sing? We’ll sing about our favourite things, just like always — only — only, we’ve got to whisper it, OK?”

“— THE FUCK IS HE?”

“Will you sing with me, Theodore?”

“— NOW OR I SWEAR —!”

“*Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens ... Bright copper kettles and warm woollen mittens —*”

Just then, the shouting ceased completely, and Hermione faltered. Her eyes darted to the slim stretch of space directly above her head, through which she could see out the bedroom door and all the way to the wooden bannister that enclosed the stairwell.

Swallowing thickly, she forged on, her voice too fast and too stilted. “*Br—brown paper packages tied up with strings —*”

So sudden and bright that it burned into her eyes, a flash of light coloured the hall the ghastliest of greens —

“*These are a few of my favourite things ...*” She trailed off, exhaling shakily.

When the light faded, everyone was back to shouting.

“*WHY THE BLOODY HELL WOULD YOU —*?”

“— LIES! *HE’S A LIAR*! THE DARK LORD —!”

“— FUCK OFF ME —!”

“— THINK THAT SOLVES ANYTHING?”

Theodore began to sob in earnest again, his body wracked with violent trembles. Hermione shifted as close to him as she could in the cramped space, able to do no more than keep holding his hand, reminding him that he wasn’t alone, and sing unsteadily about wild geese that flew with the moon on their wings, hoping that he would focus on those words rather than the others, most of them coming from voices he could undoubtedly recognise.

His father’s, firstly; the voices of his father’s closest friends; the one belonging to his godfather; Rodolphus’ and Rabastan’s voices; Gaspar’s; and even Barty sounded present. Until that night, Theodore would not have also recognised Bellatrix’s.

Eventually, Hermione ran out of lyrics. She paused to press a kiss to his tiny fingers, wrapped so tightly around her own, then began searching her mind for more to whisper — more to block out the sounds.

“Theodore, my Theodore, you don’t need to cry, my love. I know this is scary — I’m scared, too — but you’re going to be just fine. Just fine, I promise. Cross my heart and swear —”

She broke off, a hard something caught in her throat.

“P—P—Pa,” stuttered Theodore, “s—sc—”

“Pa’s going to be just fine, too. That, I can also promise.”

Downstairs, it sounded as though they had all discovered their Dark Marks were not quite pitch-black anymore; their collective hysteria somehow managed to magnify itself further.

When Hermione next glanced at the doorway, she did not immediately notice anything amiss, yet a sense of unease made her squint, and it was then that she spotted the rippling in the air, like that which could be seen over a white-hot flame.

Or a Disillusionment Charm.

“Theodore,” she said in a low voice, without tearing her eyes from the doorway, “I need you to listen to me *very carefully*. No matter what happens, no matter what you see or hear, *do not leave this spot*, and *do not make a sound*. Not until —” Before she could finish, a black chord with no visible attachment had shot beneath the bed to wind around her wrist, and now proceeded to drag her out into the open.

Hermione knew better than to scream.

At once, a second chord sprouted from the same spot as the first and wrapped itself around her throat, tightening and tightening until no amount of grappling could allow her to breathe —

And then he was on her, a sharp knee digging into her stomach and hot spittle spraying her face.

“Did you *really* think I wouldn’t come for you?”

She tried to speak, but the only sounds that made it past her lips were low, despairing wheezes.

“*You knew what would happen*,” Rookwood growled, in a voice of the deadliest fury. “You *knew* that going after the Potters would mean his defeat, and what did you do?”

He gave the second chord a jerk to yank her head up and slam it against the floor, hard.

“*You ensured that he did*!”

Hermione continued to claw at her neck with her free hand, a useless struggle, yet a helpless one. It was a simple terror, perhaps terror in its purest form; her every limb spasmed with the instinctive struggle of any animal to suddenly find itself without air, the knowledge of what was about to happen known intrinsically by each flailing nerve.

“If he could, he would return from the Beyond just to kill you himself!” snarled Rookwood, and then she could feel his sneer pressing against the side of her face, mocking. “But since he can’t … since you *ensured* he couldn’t … I shall be the one to kill you, *Mione*, *darling* …”

As though a trigger, that singular word made it no longer matter that Theodore was watching nearby, for all Hermione could think now was that she had once spoken it herself, before it had been ruined, to Rose and to Hugo, who were not watching, who were not nearby, and who would never have an answer as to why they would never see their mother again, because it was not only Mione Nott who would die here on this bedroom floor.

It was Hermione Granger, too.

Her ears rang, her vision blurring at the edges, black spots clouding the rippling space above her where Rookwood remained Disillusioned —

And Hermione thought, not at all inexplicably, of tiptoeing into Rose's and Hugo's bedrooms long after they had fallen asleep, just to reassure herself with the sights of their steadily rising chests, and to whisper, one last time, "*Goodnight, darling*."

The chords withdrew, sucked back into the tip of Rookwood's wand, and she choked on the little air that she could suddenly swallow. He batted her hands away, and in a heartbeat, his wand was there, certain to burn a hole into her throat —

It came to her abruptly, blessedly, and once more, she tried to speak, soundlessly moving her numb lips, hoping more than she had anything else in her life that he would stop to read them.

And Rookwood did.

"'Back?'" he repeated questioningly, his words distorted to her ears. "'He … comes … back …'"

Although she could not see him, she could sense the gears churning in his head, and could have sworn she nearly heard it when they *clicked* into place.

"He comes back," Rookwood murmured faintly, in a voice brimming with wonder. "You know all that you know … because *he came back* … That — that *is* what you're saying, isn't it? That the Dark Lord will come back? He'll return?"

Hermione nodded her head quickly, painfully.

He began to laugh, low and stilted, then high and relieved.

"Of — of course! How could I have ever doubted?" He sounded elated now. "He comes back! Oh, you beautiful, beautiful witch, you." Chortling into her ear, he smacked a slobbery kiss on her cheek, then climbed off her, his weight leaving at last.

His careful footsteps stayed silent as he snuck back out the way he had come. She rolled onto her side, coughing up bile, her gasps scraping the inside of her throat like a blade, equally sharp on her seizing lungs.

She tilted her head to meet Theodore's petrified gaze.

He was trembling still, curled into a tight ball around Crookshanks, whom he appeared to be restraining. Even now, he did not move from his spot, and he did not make a sound.

"I'm OK," Hermione attempted, failing. Her ears rang on as she heaved herself up onto her elbows, intending to manoeuvre herself back beneath the bed, then froze.

The voices had become further indistinct, but the stampede of feet on the stairs was all too clear.

With all the strength she had, she lifted her hand in a firm gesture, mouthing, "*Stay*," and went up on wobbling knees to crawl, clumsy and wheezing, out into the corridor. She dragged the door shut behind her and fell back against it, just as the group came storming over from the top of the stairs, every one of their wands drawn.

"— knows something, she must!" Bellatrix said. Tavaris sped up to cut in front of her, and whatever she added to him was lost to the distortion of Hermione's hearing.

"If anyone — interrogating my wife —"

Bellatrix kicked out at his walking-stick, tripping him up.

"It has to do — the boy, Bellatrix!" Edmund shouted from near the back, as Tavaris caught himself on the bannister.

"You — *an infant* — defeated the Dark Lord?" demanded Rodolphus, incredulous.

"It must — freak accident, Rodolphus — magical anomaly! There is no other explanation!"

Bellatrix was within a metre of Hermione when Tavaris dropped his walking-stick and threw himself at her, shoving her into the wood-panelled wall so Abraxas would get there first.

He crouched in front of Hermione; his expression, even slightly blurry, was colder than she had ever seen it.

"The Dark Lord paid you a visit this — why?"

Still panting for breath, she gaped at him helplessly, lightheaded as the others all crowded around them. Perhaps it was a blessing that she had no voice, for she did not know what she would say if she did.

Abraxas' eyes narrowed; his gaze dropped.

"To do that?" he asked, pointing to her neck. Without looking away, he raised his voice to a shout. "You've — Tavaris?"

His name had to be called twice more before Tavaris twisted to glance over at them from where he had Bellatrix pinned by the wrists and Rodolphus hissing at him from behind, his wand at Tavaris' temple.

"Seen *what*?" Tavaris snapped impatiently.

A turquoise jet of light shot overhead to hit Rodolphus, who swayed backwards and collapsed; Edmund lowered his wand with a grimace.

“Her fucking neck, that’s what!”

Tavaris released Bellatrix with another harsh shove, sending her to the floor with Rodolphus. Glowering, he limped over, shouldering Geoffrey out of his way. Abraxas lit the tip of his wand to illuminate whatever it was he could see on Hermione’s neck; a mark from Rookwood, she guessed.

Tavaris appeared to grow twice as tall then, as if his body were expanding to make room for the extreme size of his outrage.

“Where the *fuck* — come from?”

“— Dark Lord didn’t —?”

“— wasn’t fucking there half an hour ago!” Balancing himself with a hand on Abraxas’ shoulder, Tavaris bent down to look at her properly. “Which of these deadbeat bast—?”

“Oh, fuck off!” said Edmund.

“We’ve — your sight since we got here!” said Rabastan.

“NOTT!”

Their heads all shot up to glance towards the bannister. Barty skulked over to peer down at the front hall.

“— Traverses.”

“*Is that Pyrites*?”

Hermione tugged weakly on the leg of Tavaris’ trousers to get his attention. She gestured behind her.

“*Muffliato*,” she mouthed.

It took no time at all for him to cotton on; while everyone was momentarily distracted, he pointed his wand at the bedroom door and cast silently. She sagged deeper with this small relief.

“— explain to me why — fading?” Lachlan Travers said hotly, striding down the corridor with his two sons at his heels. “And — while — why Argo Pyrites is ly— dead on the floor downstairs?”

Eamon nearly trampled Rodolphus as the latter sat back up, rubbing the back of his head with a scowl.

“*Because he’s a liar*!” said Bellatrix venomously.

“We went to Nottingham Hall first,” continued Lachlan, ignoring her, “and — nowhere to be found.” With his next sentence, the ringing in Hermione’s ears quieted, and she felt as though she had emerged from deep waters just to hear him ask loudly, “What the bloody hell happened?”

Several grave looks were exchanged. It seemed that none of them wanted to be the one to say it, especially not if Hermione was right in assuming that was what had gotten Pyrites killed.

“He went after the Potters tonight,” said Tavaris finally.

“I am aware of that, Nott, but it does not explain —”

“*Pyrites*,” he cut Lachlan off with a sneer, “accompanied him to serve as a lookout, along with that spy in the Order, who’s since made himself scarce —”

“Probably already being hunted down by Sirius Black for what he’s done,” muttered Gaspar.

“I wouldn’t be opposed to joining him,” said Barty darkly.

Rabastan glanced sidelong at him, looking like he was very much in favour of that plan.

Tavaris straightened with a pained grimace, although his leg stayed propped against Abraxas’ shoulder for support.

“According to Pyrites, the cottage in Godric’s Hollow that the Potters were hiding in blew up less than ten minutes after the Dark Lord entered — with him still inside.”

“*Blew up*?”

“Impossible!”

“It’s a lie!” cried Bellatrix, at once. She was back on her feet and pacing in large circles, reminding Hermione of a black panther prowling within captivity. “The Dark Lord could never be taken out so easily — NOT BY AN INFANT!”

“What the fuck does she mean, ‘an infant?’”

Tavaris shot a glance at Hermione, unreadable.

“Harry Potter survived,” said Abraxas.

“*An explosion*?”

“The Killing Curse.”

There was a shocked silence, eventually broken by Rodolphus, who told the Traverses stubbornly, “Don’t believe them, you know there is no greater wizard than the Dark Lord. He would have Disapparated before the explosion struck!”

His father growled in frustration.

“The curse is what *caused* the cottage to blow up, you fool!” said Lucius. “It rebounded!”

“You *heard* Pyrites, Rodolphus — Wormtail went in after it happened! Not only did he find Harry Potter among the wreckage, but he found the Dark Lord’s wand as well!”

“Yet he has not come to show us the proof!”

“BECAUSE HE KNOWS HE’D BE DEAD THE SECOND HE WALKED THROUGH THE DOOR!” Edmund roared. He glared at his eldest son, his nostrils flaring. “Wormtail was the Potters’ Secret-Keeper, he’s the one who sent the Dark Lord to Godric’s Hollow tonight in the first place! What happened is on him and he knows it!”

It was only Rookwood left who knew Hermione’s secret, after all, she realised; if any of the rest of them were at all aware, they would not be blaming solely Peter right now, and they would certainly not have their backs to her.

“Pyrites was nothing but a messenger — and you saw how well *that* went for him! At least *he* got the chance to deliver his message first! If it had been Wormtail, Tavaris would have killed him on sight!”

Hermione choked on her own saliva. Clamping a hand over her mouth to muffle the noise, she peered up at Tavaris, who was leaning against the wall beside her now that Abraxas was also on his feet. In response to Edmund’s claim, he snorted mirthlessly.

“If only it had been.”

With an abrupt *pop*, Dinky appeared behind Rodolphus. They looked as though they were barely managing to stay on their feet.

“The Carrows and Lord Rosier are being here now, Master. Goppy sends them from Nottingham Hall.”

“Bleeding hell, here we go again,” muttered Geoffrey, heading for the stairs. Almost everyone went with him, some reluctantly and others positively flying down the steps.

“Dinky.” Tavaris nodded to Hermione’s bedroom door. “Stay with him.”

Dinky let out a sigh of relief, and they were gone with another *pop*.

Hermione gestured to the door, beseeching Tavaris to let her do the same, but he merely shook his head at her, and Summoned his walking-stick back from the bannister.

“We’ve still got questions for you, darling.”

The next moment, Abraxas had grabbed her by the elbow and was pulling her to her feet, making the whole hall spin. He half-walked and half-dragged her after Tavaris and the rest.

By the time they reached the ground floor, Creighton Rosier was staring at Lachlan in disbelief, the three Carrows were arguing heatedly about whether Pyrites’ order of events

could even be taken as the truth or not, Edmund was back to yelling at Rodolphus, and Bellatrix had begun to shout about the Longbottoms.

Hermione resolutely did not look down when she was steered past the body on the floor.

“How could a one-year-old have deflected the Dark Lord’s own Killing Curse? It’s inconceivable!” Amycus Carrow exclaimed. “No one’s ever done it!”

“Don’t you realise?” said Bellatrix manically. “Something happened tonight, something to do with the prophecy, and the Longbottoms are the other half of it!”

“*The Longbottoms are in hiding, you daft bint*!” sneered Lucius.

“Not if they’ve already heard,” said Barty, in a low, ominous voice. His eyes gleamed. “I bet I could find them for you.”

“I need a fucking drink,” said Tavaris, and, clearly of the same mind, Abraxas followed him to the sitting room, lugging Hermione along with them.

“They’ll be after us all now, won’t they?” said Creighton, as they passed. “If the Dark Lord’s not here to … *Shit*! After what happened to Evan, I’ll be the first one the Aurors call in for questioning!” Without another word, he bolted out the front doors. The Carrows, perhaps having come to a similar conclusion, were not far behind him.

Tavaris went straight for the drink cart upon entering the sitting room; he was draining his first helping of firewhiskey before Abraxas had even sat down. Hermione, meanwhile, had her sight set on the ice bucket. With both hands trailing the back of the sofa to keep herself on her feet, she reached Tavaris just as he began pouring a drink for Abraxas and another for himself.

“Thirty-seven years,” Tavaris said, after a minute. “It’s been thirty-seven years, Abraxas.”

Out in the hall, Edmund had resorted to screaming.

“IT’S DONE, DO YOU HEAR ME? *IT’S FINISHED*! No — no, RODOLPHUS!”

Geoffrey slinked into the room, still holding his wand, to swipe a whole decanter from the cart, drop onto the sofa opposite Abraxas, and glare mindlessly at the coffee table. Clinging to the chilled bucket of ice, Hermione sank to the floor behind the armchair, her back against the curtained windows. She placed one frozen chip in her mouth to suck on, attempting to soothe her throbbing throat.

“Son — son, listen to me — *this will get you caught*! Just because your brother and Barty — RABASTAN, DON’T FUCKING WALK OUT THAT DOOR! *RABASTAN*!”

“Angus went out tonight,” said Geoffrey gruffly. “I summoned Hick to go warn him. Better he finds out that way than because someone showed up to the same pub looking to celebrate.”

Abraxas shot back his drink before standing up and marching back out into the hall to shout for Lucius, brushing shoulders with Gaspar, who was on his way in. Geoffrey patted the cushion next to him, for which Gaspar appeared grateful.

"Have you realised, Geoffrey, it's been thirty-seven years?" Tavaris remained stuck on this fact. "*Thirty-seven years* since he revealed the Chamber to us … since we pledged ourselves to his cause …"

Suddenly, he laughed, and it was a gut-wrenching sound. He hurled his tumbler at the floor, where it shattered, firewhiskey splattering the rug.

"*THIRTY-SEVEN FUCKING YEARS*!"

Gaspar stared at him. The next tumbler that Tavaris smashed made him flinch.

"WE DEDICATED OUR *LIVES* TO THIS! Your father, Gaspar — your father *died* for it!" Tavaris yelled, pointing at him with his walking-stick. He laughed again, hysterical, and swung it at the drink cart, sending everything on the top flying off in a chaotic array of amber liquid and broken crystal. "AND ALL FOR HIM TO BLOW UP! GONE! IN A SECOND! OUR LIVES' WORK!"

Hermione had her hands raised to shield her face against the flying shards. When he reared back for another swing, she abandoned the ice bucket and scrambled to get to the other side of the armchair.

"Go home," Geoffrey told Gaspar abruptly. "Ensure everything's hidden, and ensure your wife plans on keeping her mouth shut, or else we'll be the ones ensuring it for you. Go."

Gaspar sped out of the room.

"Tavaris," said Geoffrey, louder.

"Shut the fuck up, you stupid fucking sodomite!"

He ground his teeth together, his face burning a deep red. He tried again.

"Tavaris, the Auror Office will be looking to round us all up. They will do whatever it takes to finish this; they won't hold back, and they won't let anything be swept under the rug, not this time. We need to get our shit in order."

"*You* are telling *me* to get *my* shit in order? *You*?" said Tavaris, looking outraged. "I HAVE PREPARED FOR EVERY OUTCOME!"

"THIS PLACE IS PLASTERED WITH EVIDENCE!" Geoffrey yelled back, getting to his feet. "And that's this property alone! The files in your study! That trunk up in your room! THERE'S A DEAD BODY AT YOUR FRONT FUCKING DOOR!"

Abraxas returned with an ashen-faced Edmund just in time to see Tavaris pick up the vase of lilies on the end table and launch it at Geoffrey; the latter seemed to have seen this coming,

because he was dodging before the vase got anywhere near him, lilies soaring every which way.

"I've not even *mentioned* the most incriminating bit!" he continued harshly, spit flying from his mouth. "You know — that bit that can walk, and talk, and think for itself? How can you claim to have your shit in order, *when the worst evidence against you is hiding behind that chair*!"

In unison, all four of their heads turned.

Hermione shrank back, her heart pounding.

"I have a plan for her, too."

For the third time in a matter of hours, she had to wonder if this was the part of the story in which she died. She could not fight; she had no wand, and she had no words, either. Her breaths still wheezed out of her, and her every inhale was a rasp. She could scarcely feel her arms and legs.

At that moment, if they wanted to kill her, they could.

"Believe me," said Tavaris, "she'll be saying only exactly what I tell her to. I'm not taking those Blood Wards down; Theodore won't be going anywhere, so neither will she."

Dismissing her entirely, he looked back at Geoffrey.

"I can dispose of the other evidence. I will have this place and Nottingham Hall ready for a raid by the end of the day tomorrow. But what then? Tell me, what comes after that?"

"Well, we don't fucking go to Azkaban, for a start!"

"I meant, *what happens with our lives*!" snarled Tavaris, as Edmund shuffled over to sink onto the sofa and bury his head in his hands. "*This* is what we did, *this* is what we have always done, from the time that we were sixteen! Even those years he spent travelling, getting stronger, growing more powerful, we were *right here* preparing for his return! So tell me, Geoffrey, if you think you've got everything sorted out — what the fuck do we do now?"

Geoffrey did not appear to have an answer.

"House Nott pledged itself to Salazar Slytherin nearly a millennium ago," Tavaris went on, his voice rising again, his shoulders beginning to shake with rage. "Theomund Nott, first of his name, swore to stay in Britain and await the day that his rightful heir arrived to fulfil what Slytherin himself had set out to do! And when he died before that day came, he passed this duty on to his son, and when he, too, died, Theomund the Second passed it on to *his* son, and then Fridolph Nott to his son, and Cerdic Nott to his son, and Alwin to his, and it goes *on* and *on* until — *finally* — the rightful Heir of Slytherin comes to Hogwarts! And after all those centuries spent lying in wait, watching as Slytherin's descendants continuously failed to find his Chamber, never succeeding in fulfilling their *own* duties, *I* am the one who gets to stand at the heir's side!"

He staggered half a step back, fingers tight around his walking-stick. Horrifyingly, when he lifted his hand to point at the Silenced portrait of Cantankerus, his voice cracked.

"*I* am the one who had the *privilege* of coming home to tell my father that I had borne witness to the *opening of the Chamber of Secrets*! That was *me*! I was the first of us to take the Dark Lord's Mark because that was my sworn duty from birth! It has been the purpose of my bloodline since we set foot on British soils, and *now* …"

Cantankerus was watching him with a pained expression, for once not fighting to contribute his own opinions to the conversation. Meanwhile, Geoffrey looked uncomfortable, glancing at Abraxas for help. Hermione rather felt the need to look away; to see Tavaris cry felt unnatural, somehow sacrilegious.

"Now, the very last of Slytherin's blood is gone," he said, in a rough, watery voice. "It's *gone*! That is why I ask, what now? What now, is the purpose?" He tossed his hand up in a defeated gesture, then let it fall limply back to his side. "Because I don't fucking know!"

After a long, disquieting minute, Abraxas approached him as one might a cornered animal. Hesitantly, he placed a hand on Tavaris' shoulder, and when it was shrugged off rather than met with a swing at the face, he shoved him onto the sofa.

"First," Abraxas drawled, lifting his chin, "we are going to drink — that is, assuming you've not yet destroyed all the liquor."

This earned a weak noise that was part mirthful snort and part seething scoff.

"Then I will summon Dobby to dispose of Pyrites' body. When I do that, you will summon Goppy, and you will tell him to begin ridding Nottingham Hall of everything that has the potential to be used against you. While that is being taken care of, I will help you handle matters here. Together, we will send word to your cousins, and we will tuck all that pesky evidence away, starting with calling in Hatley Gibbons to see to that mark," he added, pointing to Hermione's neck, "and whatever other damage it may be hiding."

The way Tavaris glanced at her, one would have thought he had forgotten all about it.

Managing to dig out the undamaged bottle of Sorcerer's Smoking Scotch kept on-hand for Cygnus, Abraxas joined him and Edmund on the sofa and continued in the same cool, easy manner as he removed the stopper.

"If and when the Auror Office comes knocking, we will be ready for them. And then, brothers, we will have years to sort out the rest."

With a loud sniff, Tavaris took the bottle from him. Geoffrey fell back on the other sofa, once shared with Elias, and brought to his mouth the decanter of firewhiskey he had obtained prior to the destruction of the rest. Finally, Edmund removed his head from his hands and leaned back to stare at the ceiling, waiting for the scotch to come to him.

In silence, the four of them drank to their fallen friend, no matter that he never truthfully was one.

Hermione watched them for a while, feeling quite lost herself. Tavaris had been right.

What now?

She glanced behind her at the floorboards, littered with shards of crystal, melting cubes of ice, and stray pink stargazer lilies that were darkened at their petals by pools of spilt firewhiskey. One of the curtains on the nearest window was drawn back a few inches, affording her a small glimpse of the night sky; strewn brightly across it were what must have been over a hundred shooting stars.

Somewhere out there, people were celebrating the end of an eleven-year reign of terror, and for the very first time, raising their glasses in toast of whom they would all call, with a gratitude that words could not justly describe, The-Boy-Who-Lived.

On tired, shaking legs, Hermione stood and limped out from behind the armchair. Then, with a sense of bittersweet triumph, she took that lordly seat for herself.

The end, she thought.

But it was not even close.

Chapter End Notes

If I were to split this fic up — this chapter marks the end of Part One. We're not finished yet. If you've made it this far, thank you. Sincerely.

As for the pink stargazer lilies, they symbolise prosperity, and often mean to look up at the heavens from earth.

I am so very eager to hear all your thoughts on this chapter.

Mother, Deceased

Chapter Summary

> Before you cross the street
> Take my hand
> Life is what happens to you
> While you're busy making other plans
> Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful
> Beautiful boy
> — Beautiful Boy, John Lennon

Chapter Notes

> CW: the use of dramatic irony with intent to cause harm.
>
> Welcome to Part Two, loves.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was the Dementors that caused it, the harsh rain and the harsher wind that worked in tandem to batter against the stone walls and stained-glass windows of Hogwarts Castle, leaving a lingering chill in its long, lonesome corridors. New torches had been lit throughout the week, and old ones lit again, in the hope of restoring not only Hogwarts' warmth and light, but its cheer, too.

It was a Sunday afternoon as dreary as all the Sunday afternoons to precede it that term, and most of the students were sequestered away in their common rooms, staying close to the fireplaces and scrambling to finish the homework they had put off all weekend. Three students, however, could be found in the Grand Staircase Hall, each wearing a jumper overtop another jumper to keep from shivering as they made their way up to the second floor.

Theo Nott held tight to the railing as he climbed. With every forced step, he tried not to let himself think of just how very far below him the ground was. Recalling vividly the fifty-foot fall that Harry Potter had taken in yesterday's Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff did not exactly help him in this pursuit.

There was nothing about Hogwarts that Theo loathed more than its moving staircases.

"Just don't look down, Theo," Daphne Greengrass murmured beside him. Her hands were bunched up in her sleeves to hide the blotchiness the cold had left on her knuckles. "I swear, I

could smack Draco right now for those impressions of his. He doesn't have a single thought in his head that doesn't concern himself sometimes, does he? *Honestly*! It's so insensitive!"

"I'm fine," Theo said.

"Pansy used to agree with me," Daphne continued as though he had not spoken, "but now all of a sudden she thinks Draco's the next Merlin and she won't let me say a bad word about him! It's because she fancies him, you understand," she added in explanation.

"She hides it well," said Blaise Zabini, with great sarcasm. He was climbing the stairs directly behind Theo, and by no means unintentionally.

"I expect *she* thinks so," said Daphne irritably. "She hasn't even told me yet." She looked back at Blaise over her shoulder; Theo wished she would pay attention to where she was stepping. "Did you hear her, giggling like that when Draco pretended to spot a Dementor and fell off the sofa? That's not even her real laugh!"

"What is, then?" asked Blaise.

"Oh, I could never tell you. It would be an infringement of her privacy, Blaise."

When they reached the top of the stairs, the three of them rounded the corner quickly and did not return to a normal pace until they were halfway down the corridor and the stairwell was well out of sight. Theo willed his heart to slow.

"You didn't have to come with me, you know," he said.

"Theo, it's not safe to be out and about alone these days," said Daphne, as though this were the reason for their company.

"Haven't you heard?" said Blaise. "There's a mass-murderer on the loose."

Theo did not correct him.

Just then, a broad figure appeared at the end of the corridor, coming towards them; Marcus Flint slowed to a stop when he neared and greeted Theo with a nod.

"Nott," he said, more politely than he tended to say much else. "What's brought you to this side of the castle?"

"And that's your business how?" said Daphne, which was very brave of her considering Flint was a whole two feet taller than she was and probably an extra foot wider. She stepped closer to Theo at the look she got in response.

"You saw the match yesterday, didn't you?" Flint asked Theo, who nodded. "Yeah, Bletchley said he saw you in the stands. Bloody Diggory," he sniggered, "finally got Hufflepuff a win just to go begging Hooch for a rematch once he'd done it. Pathetic. It'll be clear skies when we face Gryffindor, thanks to that mad Porlock that buggered up Malfoy's Seeking arm. You should be there. Who knows, maybe Potter'll make like his broom and crash into the Whomping Willow."

“It was a Hippogriff,” said Theo, to Flint’s confusion. “What injured Draco’s — never mind.”

Flint nodded as if in agreement. “Doesn’t matter what it was, ain’t that right? It’ll be put down, anyway.” He sniggered again. When no one joined in his amusement, he told Theo he would see him in the common room and continued on his way. Gratefully, Theo, Daphne, and Blaise did the same.

“Detention, do you suppose?” Daphne said once Flint was out of earshot.

“Why else would he be up here on a Sunday?” replied Blaise. “To visit the library?”

They all snickered.

A short while later, they had reached Turris Magnus. Daphne and Blaise waited off to the side as they watched Theo — whose heart was still not entirely calm — approach a tall oak door and lift his hand to knock only to lose his courage at the last second. He told himself that it was ridiculous to be so nervous. His reason for being there was entirely justified; however, that it was justified was another thing that he had to tell himself, so the thought did not bring him the reassurance he would have liked it to.

He lifted his hand again, deliberating. In the end, Blaise grew impatient and knocked for him, then hurried back away.

An answer did not immediately come. Theo stuffed his hands into his trouser pockets to fidget with a lone puzzle piece: the corner of Merlin’s mouth that the Carrow twins would soon require to finish the portrait of him that they were working on. He waited.

At last, a strained voice called from within the office, “One moment.” True to its words, the door opened several seconds later.

Professor Lupin stuck his head out into the corridor.

It was impossible to miss how his eyes widened upon finding Theo. He swallowed hard, and this could not be missed, either.

“Good afternoon, Professor Lupin. I — er —” Theo squeezed the puzzle piece, “— I’m sorry for disturbing you, I know you haven’t been well, but may I have a minute of your time, please? I promise to be quick.”

Lupin blinked at him.

“Right,” he said after a second. “Yes, of course. Come in.”

He stepped aside. Bowing his head, Theo slipped past him into the office.

It was not a very big one, certainly nothing to be all that impressed by, but it was warm, logs burning in the hearth, and it offered a peculiar air of familiarity, with lots of organised clutter and various distracting oddities. A bit like a humbler version of the library at the Nott Estate, from what Theo could remember of it, though he suspected nothing in Lupin’s office would be cause for investigation.

He found himself drawn to the water tank, in particular, and moved closer for a better look.

“Is that a Grindylow?” he asked curiously.

“It is,” said Lupin, just as the door shut with a *click*.

Theo jerked his head round at the noise, his shoulders tensing. Following his gaze, Lupin frowned slightly; he grabbed the doorknob and turned it, pulling the door back open a crack.

“Not locked, see?” he said, giving Theo a strange look. He shut the door once more, and it made another *click*. “That’s just the noise it makes when it closes.”

Theo nodded, relaxing. He turned back to the Grindylow.

“They swim by the common room all the time, you know,” he said, peering closer still. The Grindylow pressed its pale-green face up against the glass to flash its many sharp teeth at him; it was an intriguingly ghastly creature, though its visible lack of oral hygiene did remind him unpleasantly of Flint. “I’ve never seen one this close up before, though.”

“We’ll be studying them in class later on.” Lupin’s voice was hoarse; perhaps his illness had to do with the throat. “That’s why I have this one here — to afford you all a closer look, as you said.”

Theo nodded again, and asked, “How many teeth does it have?”

“Excellent question. I’m afraid I don’t know.”

“I read that they’ve a double-X M.O.M. classification; ‘harmless, may be domesticated,’ but it’s only merpeople who can domesticate them, isn’t it? Grindylow have drowned humans before.”

“Really, where did you hear that?”

It had been written in a fine, curly script in the margins of his copy of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. Theo did not tell Lupin this, though.

“My father has a second cousin who’s a Magizoologist,” he said. “He lives in Greece.”

The prickling feeling of eyes on the back of his neck was getting to be too much, the skin there growing hot; reluctantly, Theo backed away from the tank.

Lupin drew his attention to a pair of worn, brown leather chairs opposite his desk.

“Please, take a seat. Would you … I was just having some tea, that is, if you’d care to join me?”

A tarnished, cream-coloured teapot rested on the desk, along with a lit gas lamp, scattered quills and inkwells, and assorted piles of parchment covered in messily scrawled and probably misspelt words, judging by the amount of corrective red ink on them. On a chipped saucer that matched the pot was a cup of tea, from which thin tendrils of heat rose. Lupin had

drawn his wand, and he gestured in askance to more cream-coloured teacups and saucers clustered atop the mantlepiece behind the desk.

It was unwise to accept drinks from strangers — or, in some cases, from people who were not strangers at all. Sitting down, Theo replied, "No, thank you, sir."

He watched Lupin tuck his wand away and ease himself into his chair, wincing. He had dark shadows beneath his eyes, and he was paler than he had been the last time Theo had seen him, making noticeable a series of faint scars that lined his face. His hand shook as he picked up his tea; he put it back down without taking a sip.

"Well," Lupin said, "what can I do for you, Theo?"

Not for the first time, Theo wondered if Lupin had overheard one of his friends saying his name during their first lesson back in September. He could think of no other reason as to why Lupin knew to call him Theo instead of Theodore.

He removed his hands from his pockets to wipe his sweaty palms on his trousers. "I wanted to speak to you about the essay that was assigned on Friday, when Professor Snape was filling in for you."

Lupin sat forwards gingerly, looking inquiring.

"I can't write it, sir," Theo let out in a rush before Lupin could speak. Immediately, he felt his face grow warm. "Well, I *can* but I won't."

"You won't?" said Lupin, his eyebrows lifting a little. "Would you mind elaborating?"

"It's to do with the subject matter."

"The subject matter …"

It was unnerving that Lupin kept repeating everything.

"Werewolves, sir," Theo told him. "Two rolls of parchment to be handed in to you tomorrow."

At this, Lupin leaned back. He regarded Theo coolly.

"I see … werewolves … that is the subject matter you *can* but *won't* write about?"

Theo hastened to clarify. "No, sir, it's not that. I'll write about werewolves. I can still do an assignment on them. I was only hoping you'd let me do it through a different lens."

Lupin's frown was back.

"I could write you an essay on the effects of the social inequality werewolves are subjected to," Theo went on hurriedly, "or the history of their persecution, or on the problems with having the Wolfsbane Potion so inaccessible, especially considering all the trouble werewolves face trying to find and then *keep* work, not to mention they never get the

education required to actually *brew* the potion themselves — I'll make it however many inches you want, whatever length you deem appropriate — I just can't —" he shook his head, "— I can't write about how to kill them."

For nearly a minute, Lupin was silent, his expression inscrutable. Theo suppressed the urge to explain himself further; he had already said enough in defence, and he doubted Lupin was interested in hearing more.

"Your father," Lupin began at last, "has made his — er — distaste for lycanthropes quite known. I hope you can forgive my surprise that your own views perhaps … differ from his?"

"Well, of course they — erm — I mean, I understand, sir," Theo stammered. "I'm sure other people — my friends, for one — they'd probably be surprised, too. Or not. They —" He cut himself off. Looking at his shoes, he added sheepishly, "I'm sorry, sir."

"What on earth are you apologising for?" asked Lupin, softening. "You've done nothing wrong."

I've done a lot of things wrong, thought Theo, hunching his shoulders. With a keen sense of defeat, he said, "My mother would never forgive me for writing an essay on how to kill werewolves, Professor."

There was another silence, one that was long and load-bearing, then Lupin said, "I can't imagine there's anything you could do that your mother would not forgive, Theo."

Theo's head rose. He narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"Did you know my mother, sir?"

It could have been his imagination, but Theo thought Lupin looked twice as tired as he had a second ago. A tight queasiness stirred in the pit of his stomach.

"As a matter of fact, I did."

"Were you friends?"

"We were in school together …" said Lupin, inclining his head. He continued haltingly. "I was deeply sorry to hear what happened to her. She was … a good friend … and very dear to me."

The non-existent stench of mingled blood and vomit burned the inside of Theo's nose. He held his breath until it went away.

"Were you very dear to her as well?" he asked, in a clogged voice.

Lupin gave him a sad little smile.

"I like to think so."

Theo did not ask any more questions, lest he made Lupin more upset than he already seemed.

“You needn’t worry about the essay,” Lupin said eventually. “It was Professor Snape who assigned it, not me.”

“Oh,” said Theo, feeling oddly disappointed. “I suppose it was a bit pointless for me to have come, then. I’m sorry for bothering you while you’re recovering, sir —”

He was halfway out of his seat when Lupin held up his hand to stop him. Confused, Theo hesitated, hovering over the chair.

“Do not apologise,” Lupin told him firmly. “Not to me. Never to me.”

“O—OK.”

“And, Theo?”

“Yes, Professor?”

“You can come bother me whenever you’d like.”

But Theo would not, because too many people paid too much attention to him, and he knew what Pa would do if word reached him that Theo was paying visits to Ma’s very dear friend.

*

A pair of stiff straight-backed chairs sat opposite each other on either side of a large rectangular table, above which hovered a cool, fluorescent orb that cast a jarring brightness over the room. All four of the panelled walls stretched exactly one-and-a-half metres, the same dark wood as the floors, and apart from the presence of a single door, each wall was blank, or so it appeared.

On the other side of one such wall hid a second, even smaller room, and this room possessed a wide glass window, through which the occupants could peer, unbeknownst, into the first.

“Well?” Hermione Granger said upon entering, expectant. “Has there been any progress?”

A chair was made swiftly available to her.

In the seat next, Terry Boot grimaced.

“Not exactly, Minister,” he admitted. “He’s spoken just the once so far, and it was to deny any involvement of his wife and daughter.”

“We already have all the evidence we need to prosecute, though,” Atlas Adley said on her other side. His blunt features were all stiffer than usual. “This is really only a formality at this point.”

“I have his file here, if you’d like to take a look.”

Hermione nodded curtly. “Let’s see it, then.”

A plain folder was placed in front of her, labelled both on the front and on a tab on the side. She opened to the first page of its contents, pinned to which was a photographed portrait of the wizard to whom it belonged. Pursing her lips, she skimmed the information below.

*NAME: Nott, Theodore IDENTITY NO.: *11-NOT/M*

DATE OF BIRTH: 5 November 1979

BIRTHPLACE: Town: Nottinghamshire

Country: England

PROFILE: Eye Colour: blue

Hair Colour: light brown

Weight: 153 LBS.

Height: 6 FT. 1 IN.

Complexion: fair

MARKS/SCARS: burn scars on back of left hand and wrist; scar like a slash across right palm; small bite scar on right forearm (snake)

BLOOD STATUS: pure blood

WAND: 9 in., beech, dragon heartstring; in use since 1991

SCHOOLING: Attended Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry; achieved Masteries in Alchemy and Arithmancy. HOUSE: Slytherin

FAMILY: Marital Status: Married

Spouse (if applicable): Pansy Parkinson Nott

Offspring: Daughter, Helena Nott

Parents: Father, imprisoned D.E., Tavaris Nott; Mother, deceased —

She flipped past to find the relevant information.

The third document within the file contained the statement which had led to the recent raid, and which had been given by Atlas' eighteen-year-old son, Arron Adley, after Harry Potter had overhead him whispering about it to his boyfriend in the men's lavatory. For the sake of Arron's guilty conscience, it was officially listed as anonymous.

“Helena [Nott] always says her dad has more often than not got himself shut up in the library, working on some project or another. But last weekend … well, he forgot to put his work away when he was done, I suppose. The Time-Turner was just laying out on the desk. She didn’t know what it was at first, not until she saw the journals. There were two, and both were packed with notes on time-related magic. One was her father’s, but the other had no name on it. She said the notes were in probably about three or four different handwritings, none of which she recognised … She — she won’t find out I told you this, will she? I don’t want her to get in any trouble.”

On the next document was a summary of the raid, including who had been there and what actions had been taken, in addition to the results yielded. It had taken place at an estate located in Nottinghamshire, the current residence of the Notts, and Harry had not yet filled out much more than that. He had, however, given the estate a description, scrawled like a distracted doodle in the margins: *bigger and grander than Malfoy Manor and exactly the sort of place you would expect Pansy Parkinson to boast about owning*. He had probably thought he was being outrageously witty.

Hermione heaved a sigh, exasperated, and set her elbow on the table to prop her chin up on her hand.

What followed were a series of photographs of the raid’s findings, all taken by their favoured forensic photographer, Dennis Creevey, and each one pinned next to a description of the item it depicted. She spent a long moment studying the unregistered Time-Turner. It did not compare to the vast collection of them that had resided in the Time Room of the Department of Mysteries prior to their destruction in June of 1996; according to the journals the Time-Turner had been found with, it took approximately five minutes to activate and would stay activated for five minutes more; however, for those five minutes, it could send one back as far as they so desired. Most worrisome, it was referred to as, *the prototype*.

“He never got past the experimental stage, is that correct?”

“Considering we only found a prototype of the device he was attempting to create, we believe so, yes,” said Terry. “But I haven’t finished reading the journals, so who knows? Maybe he did get past the experimental stage and the finished product has just been stashed somewhere we won’t find it.”

“Let us hope not,” muttered Atlas.

“Yes,” said Hermione heavily, “let’s hope.”

Her eyes found the two journals at the bottom of a long list of other illegal artefacts, one of them bound in brown leather with a family crest emblazoned on the front.

A record of research and experimentation in Alchemy, Arithmancy, and time-related magic. Ownership confirmed; hand identified as Theodore Nott's. First entry dated 2 July 2017. Latest dated 29 April 2020.

The other journal was plain and worn, bound in black, and its description sent a shiver down her spine.

Contains research on time-related magic. Written in four unidentified hands. Includes no name pointing to ownership. First entry dated 8 July 1996; three of four hands do not appear until the following July (1997). Final entry on 1 May 1998.

She shut the file.

"I think we can safely assume who wanted this Time-Turner created in the first place," she said, in a tight voice, and both Terry and Atlas nodded gravely. "Has Harry checked —?"

The former cottoned on quickly. "Harry confirmed that none of the handwriting belongs to Voldemort," he assured her. "Ginny dropped in to double-check."

"The singular confirmed participant remains Nott," said the latter, "from what his daughter informed Arron. It was matched to other writing of his found in the study desk."

"We found a cheque from Lucius Malfoy in that desk, too, did you see? Big one," said Terry significantly. "Harry suspects Malfoy had the device commissioned, probably hoping to carry out whatever Voldemort never succeeded in finishing."

"None of the handwriting matches the one on the cheque," Atlas pointed out.

"The theory still fits; after all, *this* Nott was never a Death Eater. Maybe it's Malfoy who's behind everything that's been happening these past few months — the rising prejudice — I know it could be a result of the virus that's shut down the Muggle world, and perhaps it is to some degree, but it doesn't explain all the werewolves going underground, those tattooed giants walking the Greek Seas, the mountain trolls riding Graphorns in Hungary — creatures who aligned themselves *with Voldemort* —"

"A Malfoy is behind it all?" interrupted Atlas. "Really?"

Grinning, Terry amended, "All right, so maybe Lucius Malfoy is behind whoever *is* behind it."

"This will remain confidential," Hermione cut in, looking at them both seriously. "I want Obliviators on this, Atlas. I'm calling for an I.O.I., do you understand? Any intern, any secretary, any member of the M.L.E.P. who dealt with any of the evidence, filed any related report, or so much as touched this file, must have their memories altered by the end of today.

Terry, I will leave it to you to handle your Aurors. *No one* can know about the existence of this Time-Turner."

"It would be chaos," said Atlas soberly. "A device that can go back that far, even for just a handful of minutes? People would get ideas. We cannot predict the scale of the damage that would be caused if the wrong person got their hands on it."

Terry twirled a quill between his fingers absent-mindedly. "I know you have the Time-Turner itself, Minister, but we've held off on placing the journals with the other evidence as well. Right now, they're on Level Nine being looked at by Saul Croaker. When that's done, though, they'll also need to be kept someplace else, separate from the rest, someplace hidden."

Hermione thought for a minute, then said decisively, "Bring them to me once Professor Croaker has completed his analysis — I'll be wanting a copy of that, by the way. The bookcase in my office is Enchanted to prevent thievery. I'll store the journals there with the device until a more long-term solution can be found for both."

"Yes, Minister."

She drew her vine wand from an inside pocket of her robes and Conjured a large stamp, which she slammed against the front of the file, just below its label, marking it in bright red ink: *CONFIDENTIAL*.

Stowing her wand away again, she leaned back in her chair, resting her elbows on the arms and clasping her hands together. The three of them settled in to observe the interrogation.

On the other side of the Disillusioned glass, Harry had his arms crossed over his chest, his wand out and pointed at the floor. He stared at the wizard in front of him with a hard look on his face.

Theodore Nott sat sullen and silent. In the three hours that the interrogation lasted, he offered neither defence nor explanation, and at its conclusion, he asked, very candidly, if he might have his restraints removed when the time came, so that he could hug his daughter good-bye.

Chapter End Notes

Very short, I know, but I spent the last two months drafting about half a dozen different chapters for this and nothing felt right to start a new part with, so I stole from a few and the rest will be edited for the following chapters. Bless the lot of you for your patience, and Happy New Year:)

The Graphorn-riding trolls, tattooed giants, and underground werewolves are all cases of Harry's that are mentioned in the Cursed Child, and for Theo's profile, I used the one of Hermione that's found in Umbridge's office in the first Deathly Hallows film as an outline — and yes, I know it'll look a little wonky if you're reading on your phone.

Beech wands, as I gave Theo, are best matched to those who are wise beyond their years and rich in understanding and experience, and are coveted for the unique subtlety and artistry they can accomplish if properly match.

Duping Delight

Chapter Summary

> Everybody knows that the dice are loaded
> Everybody rolls with their fingers crossed
> Everybody knows the war is over
> Everybody knows the good guys lost
> Everybody knows the fight was fixed
> The poor stay poor, the rich get rich
> That's how it goes
> Everybody knows
> — Everybody Knows, Leonard Cohen

Chapter Notes

> CW: implied/referenced past rape/non-con, implied/referenced domestic abuse, and a wee face-off between constant vigilance and a capitalistic government.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Under the cover of darkness, all but the wind was still, and all but its rustling was silent. Seconds remained until dawn, and each one was counted with mounting anticipation.

The house did not invite approach, with its stone frigid and weathered and crept upon by brittle, leafless vines, and its every peak arched and spired. No doubt, this inapproachability was intentional; not much else reasoned a wrought-iron fence made unclimbable by both height and stakes designed to puncture, nor gargoyles whose stillness garnered more suspicion than had they been animated, each one poised to swoop down at a second's notice and attack, perhaps, visitors and intruders alike.

The message was clear: not all were welcome here.

A true shame, because five Aurors and the Head of Magical Law Enforcement himself were all about to welcome themselves in, anyway.

At last, the dim early light peeked out from behind the treetops. The front gates groaned in protest as they were opened, slowly and steadily; with scarcely a noise, six uninvited shadows skulked their way up a hill of dead grass towards the towering house ahead.

And then there was little point in being quiet.

"*Confringo*!"

The front doors were Blasted open with a resounding *BANG*. The five Aurors stormed into the unlit front hall with their wands raised.

"MAGICAL LAW ENFORCEMENT!" the first Auror bellowed. "THIS IS A SEARCH AND SEIZURE!"

A panicked house-elf appeared in an archway on the right, and swiftly collapsed from a Stunning Spell to the chest.

"First elf down! One left!"

The second Auror leapt over the unconscious elf in his haste to reach the parlour beyond and ensure the Floo was shut down so no alternative escapes could be made with the Anti-Apparation Charm up. He then began rifling through the bookcase, heedless of the silent cursing of the portrait watching him.

The third Auror charged past a side table that held an ornate clock, several framed photographs of a family of three, and a crystal vase of fresh pink roses, and burst through the door at the end of the hall to start ransacking the study.

The fourth Auror was ordered up the wide wooden staircase and through the first door at the top. A shriek of alarm sounded from the bedroom within, the only room with a candle burning; wisely, its occupant put her hands up before she began protesting.

The Head of Magical Law Enforcement marched furiously upstairs with the first and fifth Aurors behind him.

"WE HAVE THE EXITS BLOCKED, NOTT!" he yelled to the hall at large. "COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS UP! IT WILL ONLY BE WORSE FOR YOU IF YOU FIGHT!"

The first Auror pointed overhead; he and the latter rounded the long bannister and raced up to the second floor, yelling still.

"It's in the desk — top drawer on the left," came the high, anxious voice in the bedroom. "It's k—kept locked for —" She broke off at the sight of the first Auror in the doorway, her eyes going wide and her hands dropping to her sides.

A low chuckle rumbled out of him.

"Yeah," he said darkly. "I'm not too easy on the eye anymore, am I?"

Gulping, she averted her gaze.

"I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to stare."

"After all that hard work? Stare away. This was a team effort, this," Alastor Moody said, gesturing to his face. He extended his pegleg, giving her a good look at that, too. "And I'd wager you even know the ones who done it."

“Sir —” she started, but he cut her off.

“Oh, let’s not play dumb now, Lady Nott. The way I understand it, you’re anything but.”

Mione Nott glared at the hardwood floor, keeping her hands in sight as she knelt in a linen nightgown beside the unmade four-poster bed. An imprint lingered on one pillow, where her head of darkly bitter hair had been resting a minute ago.

The top-left drawer of her desk was taken out and placed on the surface. Kingsley Shacklebolt retrieved a wand and tossed it to Alastor.

“May I move now?” she asked, as Alastor studied the triangular etching on the reddish-pink handle. According to Amelia Bones, this was not the wand that Mione Nott had possessed three years ago, yet it was the only one registered under her name. Scowling, Alastor realised her documents had likely been falsified by Bartemius Crouch Sr’s slimy bastard of a son.

May he rot, Alastor thought savagely.

“Is your son in the nursery?” Shacklebolt asked Mione, taking a too-soft approach. He did not know any better; he was under the impression that they were dealing with a witness, and likely a victim.

Alas, Mione Nott had been an unofficial suspect far longer than she had officially been a witness.

She hesitated, then shook her head.

“He’s hiding under the bed,” said Alastor.

“He’s *frightened*!” she snapped. She glanced back at Shacklebolt, obviously having singled him out as the weaker link. “May I move? Please.”

“Go ahead,” said Shacklebolt kindly. “We only needed to ensure everyone in the house is unarmed.”

Mione sighed in relief. Hurriedly, she bent low to extend her hand under the bed.

“Theodore, my love, it’s safe to come out. I know it’s scary, but these are good people; they won’t hurt us.”

Whether her words were understood or not was unclear, because she received no response, verbal or otherwise. Her two-year-old son kept himself curled up beneath the bed, wearing pinstriped pyjamas and hugging a stuffed dragon to his chest. Never had Alastor seen a child so young be so still, so silent; it was eerie, and it recalled the genetics that might be at play to make him look like that.

He grimaced at the thought.

“Remember last weekend, how Draco and Dobby came to stay with us? It’s like that,” explained Mione. “These are Aurors, and it’s their job to find things. Someone’s lost

something very important, you see, so they've come to look through our house for it, just like they looked through Draco's house."

Shacklebolt went all soft again. He put aside the newspaper clipping he had been frowning at and approached the bed to kneel beside her. Keeping an eye on them, Alastor crossed the threshold into the bedroom, his pegleg *clunking* loudly, to look at the clipping.

"Hello, Theodore. I'm Auror Shacklebolt, but you can call me Kingsley."

The clipping, it turned out, was a photograph, taken from an article that had been published in *The Daily Prophet* two years prior. Frank and Alice Longbottom, bright-eyed and smiling on their wedding day. The last time Alastor had seen them, he had been dragging Frank's limp body off the urine-soaked rug of their son's nursery, while Emmeline Vance had been attempting to shake Alice into speaking.

Glowering, Alastor picked up a second clipping found in the drawer; another wedding photo, but of James and Lily Potter.

"I'm sorry we woke you," he heard Shacklebolt say, and it made his blood boil. Would Shacklebolt be apologising if he knew whose blood may have been running through that boy's veins? His mother had once claimed his first words had been something sweet, something even a stranger would go warm over, but he wasn't saying any words now. If it was quieter, perhaps Alastor might hear him hissing them.

What those supposed first words had been, Alastor could not recall, and he could not ask the person who had relayed them to him, either, since that person was presently buried beside his brother under a pile of dirt near their great-aunt's house in Suffolk. It had taken five shovels to dig that grave, and only one had been identified. There were four books stacked neatly on the desk, and a lone fifth beside them, as if to mock him for it.

Where are the other four, Alastor? Stacked neatly in plain sight?

"I know we can be loud at times," Shacklebolt went on naively. "We'll try our best to be quick. Right now, though, I need you and your mother to come downstairs with me."

Another clipping in the drawer pictured the whole Potter family — the dead ones, anyway — drinking eggnog and laughing in front of a Christmas tree. Among them was Sirius Black, whose head was being thrown back on an endless loop with the same mad mirth he had been barking with when the Aurors had found him in a crater in the street, surrounded by the remains of twelve Muggles and the finger of Peter Pettigrew.

Alastor swiped the drawer off the desk, sending it to the floor with a *CRASH* that had Shacklebolt glancing at him in surprise and Mione startling so badly that she hit her shoulder on the bedframe, looking not at her quills and scrap parchment spilling out but at him, as he began yanking out the other drawers, overturning them, and throwing them away with the first.

"SECOND ELF DOWN!" came a shout from below — John Dawlish, who was standing in the doorway of the basement stairwell almost directly beneath the floorboards Alastor stood

on. Directly above him, Rufus Scrimgeour and Crouch Sr had their suspect's wrists bound behind his back, preventing Alastor from glimpsing the skin of his forearms. For some reason, he was not putting up a fight.

Alastor did not like that.

"*Second elf down*?" Mione repeated, looking enraged.

He ignored her, digging about in the mess he had made on the desk to retrieve a short letter with a broken seal of shiny black wax. He turned it over to read.

6 November 1981

Dear Lady Nott,

I am writing to request your company here at Grimmauld Place at your earliest convenience. There are certain matters I wish to discuss with you, due to the personal nature of which I think it a discussion best had privately and over tea.

I shall be awaiting your quick reply.

Regards,

Madam W. Black

He sniggered. Two more letters from Walburga Black were found, both with the same request, as if she were actively being ignored and refusing to accept defeat.

As Shacklebolt Levitated the bed so Mione could retrieve her son, Alastor pulled out the final drawer, and caught himself before overturning it; inside were letters that had never been opened at all, some addressed to *Mione Nott* and others to *Mione Greenwood*, and most signed, he saw without opening them, by people who had died before receiving a reply.

But their letters were not the only ones in the drawer; a divider separated them from another stack. These ones, in contrast, appeared to have been opened, unfolded, read, folded, and unfolded and read again seemingly a hundred times over. Alastor picked up the topmost one, written in a scrawl simultaneously sharp and lazy.

5 January 1978

Dear Miss Greenwood,

I hope the arrival of this letter does not unsettle you. You do not, after all, know who I am, and I doubt a letter from a stranger at these times can incite any feelings besides

apprehension or suspicion. You may rest assured that I bear you no ill intent. Professor Slughorn wrote to me about you last month with the suggestion that I reach out, and I have come to the decision that this would be beneficial to the both of us. Before I get into that, however, allow me to properly introduce myself.

My name is Tavaris Nott, and I was once a student of Professor Slughorn's myself, though that was many years ago now. I hold a seat in the Wizengamot, but it does not fill my time as much as an alternative career might. Outside of this, I conduct my own research projects in various magical subjects: Potions, Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, and Defence Against the Dark Arts, to name only a few. I firmly believe that one can never be finished learning; there is always more to be discovered. Based on what Professor Slughorn has told me, I suspect you may be of the same mind.

Now, to the point of this letter: he has recommended that I act as a mentor to you. The curriculum at Hogwarts, he has explained, does not challenge you as it does your peers; this is where I come in. If you are amenable, I can send you a few titles on whichever subject you should find yourself interested in pursuing, and through our correspondence, I can advise and assist you in studying their contents. I have mentored several of Professor Slughorn's students over the years with this system, as well as tutored a few in the summers and whilst I was in school myself. I am certain you will have heard of at least one of them, Bartemius Crouch, the current Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Take the time to revise this offer before deciding on an answer to be sure that this is what you would or would not like to do, for I know that adding to one's workload in their N.E.W.T. year is often considered unwise.

Kind regards,

Lord T. Nott

It was no wonder, then, that Tavaris Nott was acting so agreeable. They had prepared for this, him and his wife.

Shacklebolt had by now escorted her and her son to the parlour below, out of the way. Alastor tracked them with one eye as he searched the rest of the bedroom. Few things he came across were of much interest; fewer would serve his purpose.

At the foot of the bed was a trunk full of all Mione's old school things, including textbooks, notes, and old assignments with big red "*O*"s for Outstanding on them, bent-feathered quills, nearly drained pots of ink, and the last remaining rolls of parchment, in addition to clothes that were distinctly Muggle, and distinctly the opposite of those within the wardrobe.

Three framed photographs sat on one of the bedside tables, the first of which he had seen before, at a meeting to induct new members of the Order of the Phoenix in July of 1978: it was Tavaris and Mione Nott on their wedding day, standing before what Sirius Black had identified for them all as the drawing-room fireplace on the ground floor of Malfoy Manor; although her eyes shone with tears, her smile managed to make her look sappy rather than

distressed. The second photograph showed the three Notts on the very bed Alastor stood beside; in this one, too, Mione was crying, but she was also beaming, cradling her new-born son in her arms while her husband held them both in his, kissing her damp hair. In the third, the pair were laughing, standing a metre apart on the yellow grass outside, their arms outstretched to catch the boy as he waddled between them.

A happy little family.

Alastor wondered if he knew anyone who had died on that grass. With no shortage of revulsion, he wondered what had taken place on that bed, too.

In the ensuite bathroom, while Scrimgeour and Crouch ushered a hobbling Tavaris Nott down to the ground floor and out the front doors, he found the last potential evidence that Mione's chambers had to offer; in the cupboard beneath the sink was a jar of Bruise-Removal Paste, kept in a cluster of what he identified with a sniff as Calming Draughts. Unless it was to decrease swelling, very few Healers bothered with Bruise-Removal Paste, seeing as injuries so minor healed on their own, and without a trace. Most commonly, Bruise-Removal Paste was used to conceal injuries.

Abuse, perhaps, or it could be that Lord Voldemort was as big a sadist in the bedroom as he was out of it. Hardly a shock.

Alastor Conjured a box, and in it, he put the paste, Calming Draughts, photographs, and letters, both opened and unopened. He then went through another bathroom attached to the bedroom, found nothing of worth, and into the nursery next, which offered a sense of unease and, funnily enough, no stuffed snakes. Gritting his teeth, he Banished the box to the front hall and went downstairs.

Dawlish was stepping into a corridor off the basement kitchen, his wand lit at the tip to illuminate the iron doors lining the stone walls: one wine cellar and two cobweb-filled cells. Nothing out of the ordinary for a wizarding house so old, but important to note, nonetheless.

Alastor joined Gawain Robards in the study.

"You didn't happen to find any letters from 'seventy-eight in here, did you?"

"From his wife's school days, you mean?" Robards said. He held up a scroll, taken from a small, velvet-inlaid chest filled with dozens more. "I feel like a lecher just looking at them."

Alastor snorted.

"Horace Slughorn'll need to confirm all this."

"His letter is in there as well," said Robards, nodding to the chest. "It certainly sounds like him to me, with his sly attempts at guilt-tripping Nott for failing to attend his annual Christmas party."

Alastor chuckled and Conjured another box, on which he cast an Undetectable Extension Charm. "Passageway behind us," he said, as he threw in the chest of scrolls. "Leads to the

first floor — dead end — library, looks like. Holler if you need a hand." Before he left, he added with a grin, "Though perhaps if you ask her nicely, the lady of the house might just let you in herself."

He heaved himself back upstairs to check out the second floor. On the landing, he found doors to a green bedroom, a blue bedroom, and an ugly old drawing room, and on the far side, the doors to a tunnel-like hallway, at the end of which was the entrance to the master bedroom at which he was most eager to hack away. As he stomped down the hallway, however, something on the left caught his eye; he changed course, heading out onto a small terrace.

A screech owl was perched on the stone railing outside, cleaning its feathers. In a tiny turret directly above the doors was what appeared to be a miniature owlery, accessible by a window only owls themselves could fit through. A small stone plaque on the ledge read, amusingly childishly: *Odin's House.*

"So it's here that you deliver the post," Alastor said, looking at the screech owl. "Odin, is it?"

Odin the owl raised his head to lock eyes with him, then tilted it, as though inquiring. Near him was a metal end table, on which a letter lay, waiting to be fetched.

Lady M. Nott

Nott Estate

Nottinghamshire, England

Alastor huffed an incredulous laugh.

"Have you even met your mistress?"

Odin kept staring at him, unmoving even when Alastor snatched the letter. It was, once again, from Walburga Black, imploring Mione to accept her invitation to tea.

Just then, a bright gust of silver light came barrelling through the air towards the terrace, and upon reaching it, expanded into a large, translucent rhinoceros that had Odin fleeing to his turret house.

"Nott is officially in custody," it said, in Crouch's crisp clip. "The detention clock starts now."

Plenty of time, Alastor told himself, as the Patronus dissipated, its message delivered. He looked out across the grounds, extending acres upon acres beyond the vast cemetery below. Admist the trees on the short slope that preceded the fence was a thick stump, splintered, as if the rest of it had been snapped off rather than cut down.

Laughing to himself, he pocketed Walburga Black's letter and made his way downstairs and out the back door.

He crouched beside the stump, scrutinising it. No collapsed tree remained, but in the direction that one might have fallen was a long strip of barren dirt, approximately the same width as the other English oaks scattered along the slope. Laughing still, he peered back at the lawn, spotting several more patches where the grass, dead as it was, refused to regrow.

The Order of the Phoenix had only had the one spy, who had never been all that forthcoming when it came to information about the Notts, but Morgan Travers was nothing short of a treasure herself for telling Marlene McKinnon all that she had.

Standing back up, Alastor located a set of makeshift stone steps on the far end of the slope and took them down to the cemetery, whistling a merry tune. He wound a path through the headstones, gave the large crypt in the corner a short sweep with his magical eye, and carried on through the back gate, heading into the woods to speak to the other potential witnesses.

It was admittedly clever, dividing one's property on paper to keep the ghosts out of the house. Cleverer, to round them up and hide them away in the first place, preventing them from spilling any secrets.

He walked for roughly seven minutes before coming across the first one at the centre of a great clearing.

A shade of a young girl was doing pirouettes in mid-air, bathing in the morning light as it streamed in through the break in the branches. Water appeared to drip from her gown, yet no splash was made when the droplets hit the sparkling surface of the pond below. She could not have been older than thirteen.

"Oh!" she exclaimed when she spotted him, leaping closer to the sky in her surprise. "Good day, sir. Who are you?"

"The name's Alastor Moody," said Alastor, stepping up to the water's edge. He smiled up at her, squinting past the sun. "And who might you be, little lady?"

The girl smiled back.

"I am Miss Sweterun Nott," she told him, with a somewhat embellished curtsey. "How do you do, Sir Moody?"

"Oh, I'm very well, thank you," said Alastor, equally cordially. He tipped his head to her in a bow. "I'd hoped I might ask you a couple of questions this morning, if you've the time for it."

"Why, of course!" said Sweterun, looking excited at the prospect. "You are in luck, sir. My schedule has been quite open as of late." She pretended to descend a spiral staircase to reach a big rock, where she perched and peered at him eagerly.

"What can you tell me about the new Lady Nott?"

Her shoulders slumped.

“She does not venture out here,” she mumbled sulkily, “and as I cannot venture in there, we have not been acquainted. But the elves tell me she wears my old hairpin,” she added, brightening spectacularly, “and the Hogwarts Sorting Hat even placed her in Godric’s house, just like myself!”

“Well, isn’t that a coincidence. I was in that house as well.”

“*Truly*?”

Alastor nodded emphatically, a tiny ball of warmth unravelling within his chest as Sweterun jumped and clapped her hands in delight.

“Oh, yeah, it wanted to put me in Hufflepuff, but it turns out patience is a skill I just haven’t got.”

Her laugh was like a windchime, echoing another.

“Sweterun?” called a voice from afar. “I hear voices. Who are you speaking to?”

A moment later, another ghost emerged from the trees: an older wizard whose clothing spoke of a time not nearly as distant as Sweterun’s did. He narrowed his eyes at Alastor, adjusting his monocle.

“This is Sir Moody. He has come to ask me questions, Wilfred.”

Alastor stood straighter, returning Wilfred’s look of distrust.

“He is an Auror, Sweterun,” Wilfred said coldly, without so much as a glance in her direction. “A hunter of Dark wizards. I shall handle this. Go find Diera.”

Sweterun did as bade, though not at once, and certainly not without some huffing and puffing.

“If only I had died of excitement!” she cried furiously as she tore through the trees. “Perhaps *then* I might still be allowed some!”

As her indignance faded in the distance, Wilfred held his glare. “You are not welcome in these woods,” he told Alastor.

“Not quite,” Alastor agreed. “But I’ve got a warrant with the Chief Warlock’s signature on it, so it doesn’t really matter, does it?”

Wilfred smiled icily.

“Well, then,” he said, in a voice like silk, “if that is the case, by all means, Auror Moody … see what you can manage to dig up.”

At precisely thirty-eight minutes past ten o’clock, Alastor and his team finished scouring every inch of the house and its grounds and returned to the Ministry of Magic with a too-convenient collection of evidence to the contrary. Only Shacklebolt hung back, tasked with

the protection (guarding) of Mione and her son, because she had apparently smiled at him once, and according to Fabian Prewett, she had seemed interested, which suggested leaps more patience than she had for any other Auror she had encountered.

In accordance with new irritating normalities, the Ministry's vast, panelled, and polished Atrium was crawling with hacks and hackettes, all queuing up to shove their press badges at security. Four at once attempted to block the path of Alastor and his team, needling them with questions about the earlier spectacle of Nott being escorted in with bound wrists.

"I noticed a limp," one hack said hurriedly. "Might he have been injured during his arrest?"

"No, but you'll be if you don't get out of my way."

He backed up hastily, treading on the toes of a suitably taloned fellow vulture.

Soon, Alastor and his team reached the golden-grilled lifts beyond security, and he Spelled their many boxes to form a wall to prevent anyone else from joining them. Dawlish pressed the button for Level Two with a hand covered in thin, red scratches — the cat-like markings of a suspiciously un-cat-like cat — and the grilles slammed shut with a loud *CLANG*. The next second, the lift shot up, leaving the Atrium and its nosy occupants behind.

"D'you suppose this will be enough?" Robards asked Alastor.

"Well, he'll be Marked, no doubt," he said assuredly, "so all I need outta this is something to prevent having another Lucius Malfoy case on my hands."

"For crying out loud, Moody, he was acquitted," said Dawlish, in exasperation.

"Imperius Curse, my arse."

Upon their arrival at Level Two, Alastor parted ways with them both — Robards off to the pit of Auror cubicles and Dawlish onwards to Level One, assigned to the Minister for Magic's security detail for the unveiling of a memorial statue in Godric's Hollow that afternoon. Down a corridor on the right, Alastor marched, the stream of boxes Levitating behind him, until he reached an oak door with a bronze plaque that read: *Conference Room 2B*.

Sat at the long table inside was a stately witch in a maroon uniform far neater and crisper than his own. She looked up from the documents she was scanning when he entered.

"How did you fare?"

"They knew we were coming," Alastor said, dropping the boxes on the table with a chorus of *thuds*. "I reckon everything we found today was precisely what they wanted us to find."

Emmeline Vance did not appear the least bit surprised.

"Let us see what story they mean to tell, then."

With that, he resumed his reading of the correspondence, now with her assistance.

Everything seemed suspiciously authentic. Not only was the parchment appropriately aged, but there were blotches of ink on many of the letters, when words had either been wept over or too excitably written, and even a stained ring on one, from the bottom of a glass. Moreover, the dates thus far aligned with those in Nott's planner for 1978, which held every detail of his life from haircuts to Wizengamot meeting times.

"If these were forged, Alastor, then Mione Nott truly outdid herself," Vance said. She sounded simultaneously impressed and unsettled. "Her letters from February vary from three to six feet long and they're all teeming with research. Quite lengthy questions, too, I should add, and even lengthier opinions. She's brilliant, frankly."

"So is he," grumbled Alastor, "to the world's great misfortune." His face was beginning to feel stiff from frowning.

It was on March the tenth that the tone of the letters changed, and it did so with one simple sentence: *Can you keep a secret?* Mione had proceeded to take particular care in telling Nott all about Remus Lupin, whom she referred to as, *the birthday boy*.

Unlucky sod, Alastor thought, as he picked up Nott's reply, dated the very next day.

Mione,

There was a break-in at Honeydukes last night. I know you said that you and your friends planned to sneak out to a pub somewhere in London, but in all likelihood, you would have gone through Hogsmeade in getting there. Please put my worries to rest and tell me that you were not in the village at the time of the break-in.

I was never quite suited for Gryffindor; as such, I am frequently governed by my fears. Right now, my fears pertain solely to the question of your safety. I do not want that to ever be a question.

Tavaris

It took a mere ten days more before the first hint of flirtation cropped up: *I think you might be failing as a mentor; the objective is not to make me laugh, it is to help me learn, yet here I am being glared at by Madam Pince for giggling like a third-year the week before her first Hogsmeade trip.* From that point on, the correspondence lost its formality, and this new familiarity began to eclipse anything that could be regarded as mentoring.

8 April 1978

Dear Mione,

Your story is safe with me, as is any other you wish to share. I cannot express how sorry I am that this experience is one that you have been forced to call your own. I, too, am without my parents, but it was different in my case; it is life itself which killed them, not an individual who decided they should no longer be permitted to live it. What horror this concept must instil in you, I struggle to imagine. As we have seen in this war which seems to go on indefinitely, there are some people in this world who care very little for the lives of their fellow witches and wizards; the lives of their fellow human beings, who do not deserve to suffer fates like that which has cruelly taken your loved ones from you.

The forty-year anniversary of the death of my mother, Udela, will be this coming September, and it does not matter how long a time has passed since I was a first-year at Hogwarts, sitting in Slughorn's office as he informed me of her death, it still pains me to allow my mind to linger on her memory. But she died in childbirth, taking the brother I never had the chance to meet with her. My father, Cantankerus, died of a stroke three years ago this March. The Healers believe it was a complication of a growth of some sort within his brain, but I must admit I was incapable of hearing all that they said to me in that moment. Yet I did not mourn him as I did my mother; my father and I had a complicated relationship, to say the least. He lost a part of himself after my mother's death and never regained it.

Although I can do no more than sympathise with your circumstance, I do share your loneliness; it is a feeling that has grown far more familiar than I would prefer. However, I must confess that speaking to you, even through this correspondence, has provided me with a joy that I thought I would not ever feel again. I find myself smiling every time I receive a letter written in your fine, curly print; my name looks far better in your hand than it does in my own. You may be the cure to my loneliness. Is it possible that I am yours?

Sincerely,

Tavaris

How pitiful, this tale he told. Privately, Alastor hoped *complicated relationship* meant his father had beaten him.

Dirty fucking red-handed liar.

Across from him, Vance made a quizzical noise.

"This boyfriend she mentions, Alastor — the one who was over for dinner when her house was attacked — he was the Muggle with the ring, was he not?"

"Must be, though I hadn't thought a Death Eater would lower themselves to wed a witch who'd been with a Muggle, not if their lives depended on it."

"Does she ever make clear this boy's a Muggle?" asked Vance.

"Muggle neighbourhood, Muggle friends …" Alastor tossed aside the letter. "Even tells him about making funeral arrangements for the Muggle parents of Lily Potter. He'd have sorted it

out himself if she never said it outright."

Pursing her lips, Vance jotted a note for herself on the parchment notepad within her green leather padfolio. She beat Alastor to the next letter.

"'*It is a definite possibility,*'" she read aloud, and immediately, her eyebrows drew together. "I see. A cure to loneliness." She made another note before continuing. "'*That sounds mad, doesn't it? Given how short a time I have known you? Even madder, you are older than my father was, but I suppose meeting you on parchment alters my feelings about that. I have never seen you, not even in a photograph, so the image I have created in my head is one constructed by what I know of your personality and your past. Your confidence leads me to believe that you are rather tall, perhaps broad-shouldered … I don't know, but I think you are likely to have an intelligent face. Do not ask me what an intelligent face looks like. I have no answer.*' Good grief."

"I'd wager if Fiendfyre ever left a body behind, her father would've been rolling in his grave as she wrote that." Alastor retrieved the response. "'*I should hope I have an intelligent face —*' well, if this isn't the worse one yet '*— but I haven't the slightest idea what that would entail, either. Indeed, I am tall, but you are not without confidence yourself, so does that mean you, too, are an above average height? The way I perceive confidence is different; you see, I imagine you to have very fierce eyes. Perhaps they are brown, or even golden, but I imagine that they burn; I imagine that anyone who faces your wrath would burst into flames under your glare; I imagine that they are beautiful, as I do you. Am I allowed to say that?*'" His lip curled in disgust. "What d'you know, he's a gentleman."

"Very gentlemanly, indeed," said Vance coolly. "Asking permission only after the fact." She pursed her lips again. "I hadn't taken him for a lyricist, though."

"Reckon he's had practice. Don't suddenly start liking young girls once they hit fifty, do they? Men like him."

As April went on, the flirtation increased.

How can you compliment my eyes without ever having seen them? For all you know, I could resemble a mountain troll.

I seriously doubt that you look anything like a mountain troll, but on the off chance that you do, I shall simply have to Conjure myself a ladder so that I am tall enough to meet what I am sure would remain a very warm gaze, troll or not. But I think it is unlikely you have any troll blood in you; they are not exactly known for their intelligence, are they? Pea-brained, Abraxas likes to call them, and I have known since your very first letter that this could never describe you.

You are not nearly as smooth as you seem to think you are, but you have once again succeeded in making me laugh. I have heard that laughter is good for the soul. Shall I try to make you laugh now, so that we are even?

Reading, Alastor felt, more deeply than he had in the five years since he had been one, like a father. In his mind's eye danced a little ginger-haired girl in a pink tutu, performing in the kitchen what she had learned in her last ballet lesson. Too soon, the memory changed; the little girl was done dancing, and her tutu was torn.

"She even sounds young," Vance remarked. "Just like a lot of teenage girls, lovesick and brimming with insecurity."

"Yeah," said Alastor roughly. He cleared his throat. "She sure does."

He considered now, and for the first time, genuinely, the suspicions of the youngest members of the Order. Could they be right, these suspicions, which were so strong that those who still lived had reported them to the Auror Office the first week of November? Five people had come forward, most of whom had nothing to do with the Order at all. Kidnapping, they claimed; a hostage; raped. Remus Lupin; Amelia Bones; Mary Macdonald; Pandora Lovegood; Anonymous. Yet the two Death Eaters who had jumped at the opportunity to report on Tavaris Nott had said almost nothing about his wife.

"I've never met Lady Nott myself," Katrijn Lee had said when asked, after having been sold out by her bitter, ex-radio-host niece. "Nott kept her well out of the way. If she'd ever known what he was up to, you see, she would be in here right now, telling you herself."

"Met her? Oh, no, never so much as a glimpse," Veerle Snyde had told the Aurors, once it had become clear that she and Lee had been working as a pair. "I hear she's very brilliant, though. A friend to all, apparently, even the most unsavoury of characters — Muggles, you know … the ones that are born from them … even *beasts*. She mustn't know anything at all about her husband's dealings with the Dark Lord. She simply wouldn't stand for it."

By the end, every single Death Eater must have known about her, yet even now that Lord Voldemort was gone, they all still clearly hoped to remain in the good graces of his merciful lady, because in all their finger-pointing, not one of them had so much as uttered the name Theodore Nott.

Indeed, Mione Nott was a witness, and perhaps she was a victim, too, but what the Order may very well go on wondering indefinitely was whether she was also a suspect or not.

"Alastor, listen to this," said Vance abruptly. "'*Have you seen the Prophet today? Their numbers are rising; more and more people are joining his forces every day. My friends all speak so bravely about it, saying how they wish to fight, be it as an Auror or otherwise, and I feel as though I cannot tell them how afraid I am. I have begun to reconsider Professor Dumbledore's offer to apprentice under the new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor next year. I don't think I can stay at Hogwarts and watch as students leave to face the war that awaits them on the other side of those gates. So many of them have no idea what's coming*

their way. I don't want to get to know more of them when I know they will not all survive this. I don't think I could bear it.'"

She met his gaze, disquieted.

"She didn't even attend their funerals. In fact, the only funeral held in the last four years that she *did* attend was Evan Rosier's."

Alastor felt his nose scrunch, though he knew it could not.

"The reports claim she was confined to the house, of course," Vance went on, "so it *is* possible she lacked the option to, but Nott —"

"— was at the McKinnons'," he finished. *The sick fuck.* "She'd have been supervised. She'd already been seen in public by then, too — even spent an evening with the McKinnons. She chose to stay away."

Vance glanced at the box beside her, still containing the supposedly never-opened letters from the dead.

"And yet they wrote for far longer than they should have," she sighed, half-sympathetic and half-pitying. She glanced back at Alastor. "Shall I burn the ones from the Order?"

"Best that you do," he said. "Wouldn't want anyone else reading them, and no one except us and the Notts'll know which ones are missing. I reckon those two won't say anything."

He took in the remaining letters of the correspondence; there were only four for the month of June. Frown darkening, he picked up the first, addressed to a *Dearest Mione* now.

"'*If you are ever in need of a place to go, know that you are welcome at the Nott Estate. I can keep you safe here, I promise; nothing and no one would be able to bring you harm whilst you are under my protection. The wards which surround the property will keep out any undesired company —*' that's just not true, I've had the door opened for me '*— and I will ensure that you have everything you could ever so much as dream of desiring. All you need do is say the word, and I will come for you.*'"

Vance studied the flames now rising from within the box, her wand still drawn to Vanish the eventual ashes. She, too, was frowning.

"Really did plan it all out, eh?" Alastor said. "If we'd come even a week earlier, I don't reckon these letters would've been there."

"You couldn't have done," she said tonelessly. "A signature from the Chief Warlock is required to override the rights of a seat-holder, and Dumbledore knows the same as we do that most of those allegations have little to no ground to stand on. If Crouch had not taken this so personally, he likely wouldn't have allowed you to go to Dumbledore at all."

Glowering, Alastor kept on reading.

18 June 1978

Dear Tavaris,

My friends continue to discuss their plans for the future, and it breaks my heart to think that some of these plans may not come to fruition. In less than two weeks, we will all be graduating, and then they will go off to face the danger that awaits them outside this castle, which I suspect they know little about, no matter how often they speak of it. They do not know death like I do, and I do not want them to.

I will be remaining behind all alone. I know that I will be safe at Hogwarts; after all, they say that Professor Dumbledore is the only wizard You-Know-Who has ever feared. So I should be fine, but no more than that. It will be so lonely here without so many of my friends. I will still have Pandora, but as her teacher, would our continued friendship not be considered inappropriate or a conflict of interest? I am already so alone. Apart from you and my friends, I have no one, not anymore.

If you truly can ensure my safety and make good on your promise to take care of me, then please take me away from here. I don't want to be abandoned again, even if it's not by choice. I want a home again, a place to call my own and a place where I can build a family to make up for the one that I no longer have. Can you give me that?

Sincerely,

Mione

He passed the tear-stained letter to Vance, grim, and grabbed the next.

21 June 1978

My Dearest Mione,

I would give you the world if I thought I could manage it. I would grant all your wishes so that you would not ever have to wish for a single thing for the rest of your life. You can be mine, if you so desire; I would scour the earth to find a ring worthy of you, and I would dedicate my entire existence to building you a home to call your own, and I would guard it with my life.

I will travel to Hogwarts on the day of your graduation. Meet me at the front gates at nightfall. I shall be waiting to take you home.

Yours,

Tavaris

“He sure knows how to wield his words, Tavaris Nott.”

“That, he does,” murmured Vance, without looking up. She had gone slightly glassy-eyed and was once more adding to her notes. He left the letter at her elbow, near the box-turned-chimney, before reaching for the final one.

29 June 1978

Dear Tavaris,

Do you remember when you asked if you were the cure to my loneliness, like I am to yours? I’m certain of my answer now, and it’s yes. “Home,” you say; I look forward to the day I will be calling it that myself. I think Mione Nott has a nice ring to it, don’t you?

All yours,

Mione

“I hate to say it,” Vance started a minute later, and then, albeit reluctantly, she proceeded to say it: “these don’t seem forged to me.”

Alastor shook his head. “They never saw her receiving any post, though, did they? Not once.”

“I suspect she will have an explanation for that. Still, I’ll ask her to read some of the content aloud, see if she’s as familiar with it as she ought to be,” said Vance. She Duplicated one of the letters and tucked it into her padfolio, then stood. “If I don’t return within the hour, I will send Shacklebolt back. If Mione Nott decides to talk, I will listen for however long she’s willing to do so. But do bear it in mind, Alastor,” she added seriously, “perhaps a letter is simply how it began.” With a meaningful look, she strode out of the room with her padfolio clutched to her chest, off to interview their witness.

Shacklebolt joined him fifty-four minutes later with dirt clinging to his robes.

“What the hell happened to you?”

“That patience she supposedly had? It ran out,” he said, dropping into a chair with a weary gust of breath. “Vance and Dixon told her to choose the room she’d be most comfortable in, which happened to be the conservatory. I spent the last half-hour helping her repot all the plants you lot overturned.”

Alastor straightened up, having been hunched over a collection of Nott’s financial records.

“Nothing was found in those pots,” he said, and now he felt something should have been. “She tell you to help her or did you just do it?”

“I couldn’t simply stand there and watch.” Shacklebolt drew his wand to cast a Scouring Charm on his robes, ridding them of dirt. He met Alastor’s gaze as he leaned back. “She was hysterical. The cat, too.”

“That’s assuming it *is* a cat.”

“What else might it be, Moody, if not a cat?”

“I dunno but I never saw it ‘til today and I don’t trust it one bit. I reckon the feeling is mutual. Got the teeth marks on my pegleg to prove it.” Shacklebolt opened his mouth, presumably to attempt to reason with him, so Alastor shifted the subject before he could. “Vance and Dixon are now dealing with a hysterical witness rather than a level-headed one, then?”

“Unfortunately.”

“Oh, that’s far from a bad thing with this one. She says a lot when she’s hysterical, even when she’s not sayin’ a thing. And we need that, Shacklebolt, ‘cause all this —” Alastor picked up a stack of bank statements and threw them back on the table, scowling, “— has given us a whole lot of nothing.”

And in the hour that followed, a whole lot of nothing was exactly what the pair scrounged up.

The Snyde and Lee witches had claimed Nott was responsible for funding a great deal of Voldemort’s effort in the war (no surprise there), yet, according to the documentation provided by Gringotts Bank, the sums that had been coming out of neither the Nott family vault nor the personal one he had opened when he came of age were large enough to back that up; in both cases, there was far more input than there was output.

As for the other goods and materials he had reportedly supplied (namely, that which was strictly prohibited by the Potions Association), his father had handed the running of the European Potions Trade and Distribution Company over to a German cousin back in the ‘60s — a cousin whom Nott saw typically only to celebrate a new member of the family or to bury a pre-existing one. Increasingly annoying, the only ingredients that had been found at the Nott Estate just so happened to align with the only potions that had been found; there had been Mione’s collection of Calming Draughts, which told Alastor that she was likely prone to fits of anxiety (or plant-related hysteria), and from Nott’s own inventory, there had been a few vials of Sleeping Draught, a few of the Draught of Peace, and plenty more of various pain-relieving brews, which told him that there was a lot wrong with him (something Alastor had already known).

Even the many titles throughout the house that Robards had made a list of proved unhelpful, for they could not arrest Nott for possessing inherently Dark texts, nor for the few Dark artefacts he used as bookends. It was, sadly, legal, and further excusable by the fact that he had once apprenticed under a Master of the Dark Arts, and contrarily, the defence of them.

It became glaringly obvious that none of the potential evidence compiled would become at all substantial unless one of two things happened: Mione spilled her guts to Vance (unlikely), or Nott let Alastor get a good look at his left arm (it would happen whether he liked it or not).

Still, one problem remained, and eventually, Shacklebolt had an idea that might just solve it.

“Can a wizarding marriage bond even form if both parties are not entirely willing?” he asked, reclining on his chair and staring thoughtfully at the ceiling. “One would think the Imperius Curse would interfere with the magic.”

“One would *like* to think,” said Alastor cynically. “Doesn’t mean it’s true.” Nevertheless, he had Shacklebolt hunt down Robards and send him to the Department of Mysteries to hammer on all the doors until an Unspeakable opened one just to get rid of him.

It took a questionably long amount of time for Robards to burst into the conference room, nearly staggering into the back of Shacklebolt’s chair to avoid tripping over an empty box.

“Merlin’s beard, Robards, it shouldn’t have taken *that* long!”

“I ran into Crouch on the way there,” Robards explained in a rush, a bit breathless. “He wanted an update, and then he wanted to yell because I had none. I only got away because Martin Bones stepped in to mediate.”

“It seems he’s been doing that an awful lot lately,” Shacklebolt remarked, in an undertone.

“Did you at least manage to get an answer from the Love Room?” asked Alastor.

Robards nodded.

“You were right. Wizarding marriage bonds can form regardless of whether one or both parties are unwilling,” he revealed, and for some reason, he began to grin slightly. “*However*, they *cannot* form in the event that there is any magical interference.”

Alastor could feel the corners of his mouth lifting.

“Such as the Imperius Curse.”

“Such as the Imperius Curse,” Robards confirmed. His grin broadened, triumphant. “Therefore, if Nott served You-Know-Who under its influence, he could not have married his wife. According to the Unspeakable I spoke to, whatever directions he was given are irrelevant; simply being under the curse would prevent the bond from forming.”

Alastor clapped his hands together.

“Well, all right, then!” he guffawed. “Now we’re talkin’!”

“Does this mean you can go all mad-eye on him now?”

He paused.

“What’d you just say to me, boy?”

Robards had brains enough to look sheepish. Shacklebolt appeared to be holding back laughter, seeming to have forgotten Alastor could still see him with his head turned. They

were both lucky not to have been smacked.

“Pardon me, sir,” Robards mumbled awkwardly. “What I — er — meant to say was, do you have what you need to interview the suspect now?”

“How about you stop talking?”

“Straight away, sir.”

Eighteen minutes later, the three of them were riding the same lift down to Level Nine as Arthur Weasley, who had lost more of his hair between having his sixth child and his seventh, and more still, with each new claim someone made of being under the Imperius Curse.

“I heard Tavaris Nott was brought in this morning,” Arthur said. “Is that where you’re off to now? To interrogate him?”

“Oh, I won’t be doing the interrogating myself,” Alastor told him. “I want to hear the story he’s got prepared, and he’ll tell it best to someone he thinks might actually buy it.”

Arthur chuckled tiredly.

“Well, good luck to you, all the same, Alastor,” he said, as the lift jerked and halted. The grilles slid open to let them all out. “What is it he’s in for, if you’re able to tell me? Beyond the obvious, of course.”

“Not murder — yet.” Alastor eyed him curiously as they strode down the corridor, past the entrance to the Department of Mysteries and onwards to the stairs that led to Level Ten. “Say, you’re a good judge of character, Arthur. Have you ever met Nott’s wife?”

“As a matter of fact, I have,” Arthur said, shooting him a look of equal curiosity, “although I did not know it, initially, truth be told.”

“What’d you make of her?”

He appeared to ponder it for a moment.

“I thought she seemed the sort Molly and I would have at our dinner table,” he said finally, and at the foot of the stairs, he stopped and sighed. “But you never do know, do you? Not until it’s too late.”

Sometimes you do know, Alastor thought to himself, as they went their separate ways. *You just never know enough.*

The Sneakoscope that had resided in his pocket all morning started whistling for the first time as he neared the holding cells.

He nodded his head at the guard posted by the doors — a dull-eyed Hitwizard by the name of Daemon Burke — then again at Sturgis Podmore stationed at the desk inside, and proceeded into the Interrogation Corridor. As he, Shacklebolt, and Robards approached a door with a large brass number “*2*” on it, Alastor took out the Sneakoscope and cast a Silencing Charm

on it, leaving it to alert him by quieter means. Stowing it away again, he stepped through the panelled wall precisely one metre right of the door, the other two close behind him.

Crouch and Scrimgeour were sitting at the long, narrow desk before the small chamber's Disillusioned window. Alastor walked up behind them to stare into the room beyond, even though he no longer required a window to do so.

Nott's elbows were resting close together on the table, and his hands, still bound at the wrists, were clasped together in front of his mouth, his thumbs out to serve as a perch for his chin. It was the sort of poker face that Alastor had learnt many years ago, back when he was training to be an Auror; a pose that tricked one's mind into thinking there were no clues to be found on a certain face, so their eyes ought to be on another player instead. Eventually, without conscious thought, they would stop looking back at that face entirely.

He had no doubt that Nott had picked the trick up whilst he was working on his Mastery in Magical Law.

"Have him sweating it out, do you?"

"He's been too agreeable," Crouch said, his tone biting. "With enough time spent alone in this room, I guarantee that will end. I may not know him as well as I thought I had, but the fact of the matter remains that I *do* know him." He pointed at Nott. "And that wizard cannot sit still to save his life."

Sure enough, Nott's right leg was bouncing beneath the table. According to Scrimgeour, it had not stopped for over two hours.

"Bagnold wants this finished quickly and cleanly, and so do I. She's meeting with the Potions Association in the morning, and she's already received warnings from International Magical Cooperation about what this may do to the continental market. So," said Crouch brusquely, angling his chair to face them all, "tell me what you know."

Fifteen minutes later, the door to Interrogation Room Two was opened. Crouch marched in, his face set, with Scrimgeour at his heels.

"I am Bartemius Crouch, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and I shall be administering today's interview. I am joined by Auror Rufus Scrimgeour, who will be recording our conversation for the purposes of the ongoing investigation. This interview is being conducted at the Ministry of Magic, Level Ten, Interrogation Room Two. The date is Friday, November the thirteenth, nineteen-eighty-one. The time of commencement is thirteen-eleven. Please state your full name for the record."

"Tavaris Cantankerus Nott."

Crouch sat forwards to plant his elbows on the table, caging in the many notes before him. He steepled his fingers, a pose of power rather than of concealment, and fixed Nott with an immovable glare.

“What would you like to start with, Nott? What you did for He Who Must Not Be Named or what you did to your wife?”

With wicked anticipation, Alastor watched Nott pick up a shovel and begin digging himself an early grave with his lies.

He was in the middle of spewing some taradiddle about a light in his lonesome little life when Vance’s blackbird Patronus appeared to summon Shacklebolt back to the Nott Estate. She returned herself fourteen minutes after he had departed and was accompanied by a warm-mannered witch with sharp, juxtaposing features: Nina Dixon, Head of the Office for Domestic Disputes and Disturbances.

Their expressions were unpromisingly subdued.

“Well?” Alastor prompted, impatient, while Nott tried to justify his attraction to an eighteen-year-old.

“I believe she knew what we had really come to speak to her about the second we arrived,” said Vance heavily, casting a glance into the interrogation room. She sat down on the chair beside him, eagerly offered up by Robards, as Dixon took up the chair on her other side, the narrow chamber again becoming uncomfortably crowded. “Before Dixon had even introduced herself. It was an hour or so before we were able to begin interviewing her. Did Shacklebolt mention the plants?”

“That reaction alone was telling,” said Dixon, at Alastor’s nod. “She needed some time to calm down before she could answer any questions. Based on her choice of room, the conservatory is where she’s most comfortable, and if what your informants say is true, then she entered her safe-haven only to discover it had been torn apart.”

“*If*?” repeated Alastor. “*If* what they say is true?” He could feel his temper rising, egged on by Nott’s reading of the letter in which he bloviated about the cruel killing of one’s *fellow human beings*.

Dixon and Vance exchanged a significant look, then, sighing, the latter said, “Mione denied all allegations against her husband.”

Of fucking course, she did.

“We knew this might happen,” Vance continued, raising her voice to be heard over the immediate outrage. “That is *why* Nott was removed before anyone spoke to her! And for Merlin’s sake, lower your voices or we won’t be able to hear what they’re saying! Besides, regardless of whether she was telling us the truth or not, there were still … signs.”

“What sort of signs?” demanded Alastor, at the same time that Robards exclaimed, “We cannot build a case on *signs*!”

“No, but you *can* support one,” said Dixon patiently, “and if Mione believes you have a solid case against her husband, it is extremely likely that her answers will change.”

“They had better.”

“This is only the beginning, Auror Moody. It takes a victim of domestic abuse seven times, on average, to leave their abuser for good.”

“We haven’t the time for *seven*!”

“*As I said*, there were signs,” said Vance, quite a bit more sharply this time round. “Tiny, unavoidable things. They could be meaningless, but nevertheless …” She opened her padfolio to reveal the notepad within, inviting them to look closer at her notes; in her favourite emerald ink, she had written, *“tut” — trigger?*

“What’s this one, here?” Alastor inquired, pointing to it.

She clicked her tongue, replicating the noise, and said, “I hadn’t meant to do it, the first time, but the second I had, she went completely rigid. I did it again while she was speaking, and she asked if something was wrong. Dixon had to repeat the question. She also sits where she can face the door — keeps an eye on it same as you do, Alastor — and she pauses every time a quill moves, as though just the sound of it prevents her from stringing words together. I would dismiss it as distraction if I didn’t know she proved herself to be an exemplary student while she was at Hogwarts; the scratching of a quill shouldn’t muddle her thoughts.”

“She refused to let her son out of her sight as well,” added Dixon, “so Vance had to cast a spell to muffle our voices, that way he could stay in the room.”

Alastor nodded along. He pointed to another note. “And the inspiration for this — ‘*L.P. and friends — grief or guilt?*’”

“Well, that *is* the question, isn’t it?” replied Vance, raising a sharp eyebrow. “We were discussing her correspondence with Nott, and she confirmed that she did not read his first letter until weeks after she had gotten it because she had been looking after Lily Potter — may she rest in peace — and her Muggle sister. She stuttered over the name.”

As she spoke, Nott was telling Crouch almost exactly the same thing, only he did not stutter. He did not appear bothered by the involvement of Muggles, either, so perhaps he had practiced in the mirror how to sufficiently supress his stammers and sneers.

“Too guilt-ridden to keep seeing all those lilies round the house, you reckon?” Alastor murmured. “Roses now.”

“Yes, I noticed.” Vance pursed her lips, then let out yet another sigh. “I offered my condolences, Alastor. I believe she genuinely had no idea what losses I was referring to.”

Alastor frowned but did not look up from her notes, not properly. He frowned more deeply at, *“someone who could give me the answers to all my questions”*, and deeper still at, *began with choice?* He snorted at, *admits to frequent arguments — “debates” (denial), “argumentative” (self-blame)*, and found his eyebrows lifting when he read, *E. Travers, prior dislike due to dispute over house-elf rights*.

“The worst is at the bottom.”

He looked lower: *refuses to say “rape”*.

Peering over his shoulder, Robards breathed a curse.

“I explained what was reported — even *who* reported it. I thought that might sway her. Needless to say, it did not.”

Dixon nodded grimly. “She called it appalling, and she looked appalled, too,” she said. “Her breathing grew rapid, and she became defensive, more so than she did at anything else. When asked to either confirm or deny the allegations, she could only use the words *consummation* and *consensual*. Even then, she struggled to get them out.”

“Did she dance around any other questions or just this one?”

“A few, but not nearly to the same degree.”

“They prepared for this,” said Alastor, because it bore repeating. He eyed Nott’s easy posture, his right leg no longer bouncing. “She knew she’d be getting questioned.”

Vance gave him a weighted look.

“They may have been prepared for us to search their house, Alastor, but she was most certainly not prepared for this.”

“I think some of the allegations are true,” said Dixon softly, after a moment, as she studied Nott herself. “I think Mione was a very lonely, very homesick girl who became attached to an older man and his words. No doubt, she’s since been disillusioned, and in some sick and twisted ways, for which this world continues to prove its profound proficiency. But then?” She shook her head.

“If so, how is it she managed to hide all those letters?” asked Alastor. “She tell you two that? She tell you why she never told anyone a single thing about them?”

“She was ashamed of what she wanted,” said Dixon, as if this were the simplest excuse in the world: “a family over a career. It was just the opposite for me, but I do know the feeling. I had quite a few friends who wanted to settle down quickly or have quiet careers so they could focus their attentions on their children. Mione kept it a secret because she feared her friends would judge her.”

“She left the dormitory window open at night,” said Vance, much more straightforwardly, “so the letters could be deposited on her bed whilst the other girls slept.”

A likely story.

“… but in the absence of an answer,” Nott was saying now, in a quietly perplexed voice, “to reason a thing like this … it’s as if they never knew her at all. Not her fears, not her dreams … She was *terrified* of the conflict, *terrified* to lose yet another person. She may not have been in that fire that killed her parents and her boyfriend but, fuck, those flames still left

scars. A firm faith in her moral character, you say — *that* is their justification for these accusations? When, in the months that they spent in her presence, they never once noticed those scars? Just what character did they presume to be speaking about?"

Dixon studied him still, shaking her head now, almost to herself. Her shoulders hung low with the weight of her weariness.

"It's a dreadful shame society's done that to us," she said. "No matter the choice we make, we will always be wondering if the people around us think it's the wrong one."

Alastor was not yet convinced, nor was Robards, thankfully.

"Do you suppose your eighteen-year-old selves would've been swayed by Nott?" the latter asked pensively.

"Yes," both Dixon and Vance admitted, taking Alastor aback.

"Mione may have been sceptical at the start of their correspondence — suspicious of any stranger and smart to be — but she was just a girl," said Dixon, with a small shrug. "I remember falling victim to it. Most of the girls I knew growing up did. It's unfortunately easy at that age."

"Too young to know any better; too hopeful to think twice about a kind man's promises," said Vance. "And he got her, in the end."

Unease stirred within Alastor, tension building in his teeth.

"It doesn't explain the rest," he said, looking at Vance significantly.

Before she could say anything to this, or, for that matter, give him a look that meant she would not be saying anything at all, Crouch very loudly lost the last scrap of patience he had possessed.

"*He was set to begin studying Magical Law under you in the new year*! And you expect me to believe you were not involved in the training of He Who Must Not Be Named's recruits? Not for a second!"

Although it was not quite shouting, it was forceful enough to eject more than a bit of spittle from his mouth.

"I have mentored many people who did not fight for You-Know-Who," Nott reminded him, raising an eyebrow pointedly. "That is not a secret. These claims made by the Lee and Snyde witches in their last, desperate moments before sentencing all pertain to aspects of my life that are public information. Providing goods and materials to his cause, specifically potions ingredients? My family has run the E.P.T.D. for over three centuries now. Monetary support? We have the wealth for it. Housing? We have the properties."

"With that way of thinking, they could have named no shortage of people," said Crouch, cleverly omitting the fact that those two witches had, in reality, only tattled in their interviews after Alastor had asked after Nott himself. "Why you?"

“Elias Avery was a close friend of mine from the time we were children,” replied Nott. “Again, that is no secret. He has other supporters, too, with whom I’ve been associated. I’m sure, when they were attempting to bargain with you, Lee and Snyde considered me a likely suspect — not to mention, a convenient one.”

“He’s good,” Robards admitted, however reluctantly. “He’s very, very good.”

Alastor shot him a malevolent grin.

“So good that he’ll soon find himself with a much longer sentence for perverting the course of justice. He’ll be meeting his end in Azkaban now, mark my words.”

“That depends,” said Vance.

“On what? He’ll have that Mark on him — you know it, I know it, and soon enough so will everyone else.”

She gave him another one of her looks, the sort that tended to imply he was being so massively short-sighted that correcting him would take more time and energy than she had to spare. Rather than reply, she flipped up the topmost page of her notepad, wordlessly telling him to read the remainder of her notes.

He had one eye halfway down the page, a truthfully stubborn curl to his lip, when his attention was once more seized by Nott, who, astoundingly, was lifting his sleeve with the help of his teeth.

The next second, no longer angled suspiciously away from the window, it was revealed; inked onto the inside of his left forearm for them all to see, his pale skin glowing under the fluorescent orb hovering overhead, was the faded image of a skull with a lifeless serpent tongue.

“Then again, perhaps it was this that convinced them I’d be the right wizard to name.”

Shock did not come easily to Alastor, but it slammed into him now. He shot up from his seat, cursing loudly, whilst Robards’ jaw tried its absolute hardest to befriend the floor. Crouch was close to gaping himself, struck dumb. Neither he nor Scrimgeour seemed able to tear their gazes from the Dark Mark.

“You’ve asked me before, what happened to my leg,” Nott said. “If you recall, I made a joke about ageing. Well, I lied.”

“What the fucking hell is he playing at?” growled Alastor, and this time, Vance slid over her entire padfolio. Two-thirds down the current page, he spotted, *Dark Mark confirmed — post-wedding attack*.

Nott was making a grim face, his eyes shadowed and sleepless.

“Mione and I argued about whether I should tell you this or not,” he went on, before Crouch could regain his voice. “You’re thorough, we knew you would look our way at some point. Auror Moody made his suspicions quite clear.”

Alastor scoffed, in perpetual incredulity of his audacity.

“She wanted me to reserve my right to refuse to remove any clothing. The explanation that accompanies this, you see, is not one she wants divulged. However, I believe it is high time I reported it, assuming you can agree to keep it out of the papers.”

Crouch’s head jerked up at this.

“He owns a percentage of those bloody papers!” Alastor spat.

“Keep it out of the papers?” Crouch repeated. He pointed to the Dark Mark. “Keep *that* out of the papers? I think not! I cannot imagine why you wasted so much time feigning innocence if you were only going to —”

“You never did let me explain things without interrupting.”

Crouch scowled.

“Explain, then. As a matter of fact, I’d like to see you try!”

So would Alastor.

“July the first, nineteen-seventy-eight. The morning after I married Mione,” Nott began, with a low sigh of pathetically theatrical defeat. “It was at Malfoy Manor, the ceremony, and we didn’t leave until quite late. Past four, I believe, though my memory of those hours is rather unspectacular. My Floo wasn’t connected — you know how I loathe people popping into the sitting room without warning — so we decided to Apparate. Unwise, given our state, but in our state, unwise is precisely what we were. I do recall the stars, though; Mione wished to walk under them for a while. You must remember that she was already planning to sequester herself in the Nott Estate. The allure of a stroll under the stars was strong because she knew she wouldn’t soon be doing it again.”

He paused for a moment to study his Mark, the hem of his sleeve hanging loosely from the crook of his arm. He managed to make himself appear saddened by the sight.

“I could not possibly describe to you how deeply we both regret not Apparating the second we crossed the property line. We were ambushed within minutes, just far enough away that none of the Malfoys would see if one of them happened to look out a window. There were … *four* of them … all cloaked in black and wearing those skeletal masks — costumes, really — like children playing dress-up.”

He must have considered his masculinity at least somewhat secure if he could admit this about himself.

“I believe Elias was among them, since he’d left the manor an hour or so before us and would’ve known where we were, that we were likely to Apparate, but I was blind to his allegiances back then. I had been receiving anonymous invitations to join You-Know-Who for years by that point, as you know, but I never suspected he would resort to the lengths that he did that day. He was not a wizard who took kindly to being ignored, I suppose.”

As if he did not know this first-hand.

"I was Disarmed in seconds, simply because I hadn't seen them coming. I heard no crack of Apparation, so it's likely they had been hiding in the treeline, hoping we would pass by … perhaps following us down the road … One of them cast what I can only assume was a concentrated form of the Incarcerous Spell — this chord that shot out of the air to wrap itself round Mione's neck … and it was as though I had blinked and suddenly she was two metres away with a wand at her throat, just … *clawing* at her neck …" He chuckled, weakly and humourlessly. "I tried to fight them like a Muggle. It didn't work, obviously. A few more seconds and I was on the ground, and my leg …" He trailed off, turning sideways on the chair. Paying no mind to Crouch's wand suddenly trained on him, he rolled the left leg of his pyjama trousers up to mid-thigh to reveal a second mark — or rather, a scar, and a slightly grotesque one, at that, judging by the pallor of Dixon's face.

Yet she was merely shaking her head again, meanwhile Vance crossed her arms over her chest, looking utterly unperturbed.

"That must have been quite the Severing Charm," Crouch remarked, peering at the scar, but Alastor suspected this was the product of another spell entirely.

"*Sectumsempra*," Nott corrected, as anticipated. "I'd never heard of the spell until then" (*What a flaming load of shit,* thought Alastor) "but I looked up the Latin; *sectum* is *to cut*, and *sempra*, *always*. Mione compared it to Conjuring an invisible sword. Our Healer said I was lucky not to have lost the leg, but it was intended to be a close-call. After all, what they really wanted was for me to take the Dark Mark." His voice became light and snide. "'Or would you prefer I cut a little deeper? You don't really *need* both legs, do you?'"

Not terribly. Alastor was extremely willing to demonstrate this. He knew the spell, and when teaching, it was best to give more than one example.

Stiffly, Nott covered the scar back up and faced the table again. His jaw was tight, so perhaps his masculinity was not so secure that it saved him the discomfort of displaying vulnerability.

"When that did not earn them their desired answer," he said haltingly, "they … they threatened to do *unspeakable* things to Mione, if I continued to refuse."

"So you did not," Crouch inferred.

"Yes. But not quickly enough."

Scrimgeour's quill stilled for a second, then resumed.

"Mione never shies away from voicing her opinion," said Nott, and this, at least, was undeniable. "She started protesting at once, telling me not to listen to them, not to worry about her … *wheezing her every word* … She used the little air she had and wouldn't stop using it. My indecision lasted long enough for the wizard restraining her to pin her to the ground and pull out a dagger."

He stared past Crouch, his eyes glazing over. It was the same lost look that Alastor had seen countless times in the last decade; the same one that nearly everyone wore nowadays. And Nott, with all his skullduggery, had the gall to recreate it.

“I agreed the moment she started screaming.”

Crouch sat back with a long exhale and transferred his wand to his other hand to make a note with his quill.

“One of them summoned You-Know-Who by touching the tip of his wand to his Mark, and then …” Still, Nott stared, ever the lugubrious raconteur. “I’ve studied the Torture Curse, you know — Cruciatus.” They could have sorted that much out for themselves, actually. “It’s said to be the worst pain in the world, agonising beyond anything one could ever imagine … and when I felt it myself, I was surprised, because that pain was nothing compared to what I felt when I realised Mione had stopped screaming.”

He blinked, pretending to return to the present.

“Describe what happened next,” said Crouch tersely, looking at his notes rather than at Nott. His shoulders were taut with tension, and Alastor suspected he was imagining that unimaginable pain, remembering, as he well should, how intently it had been imagined by his own son.

“I took the Mark,” said Nott bluntly. “And so did Mione, in a way. The bastard carved it into her fucking arm.”

Robards looked in slight horror at Vance and Dixon, both of whom nodded in solemn confirmation. Despite her supposed unwillingness to share this story, Mione had done just that.

Nott’s jaw was even tighter now. “Cursed her, too. With what spell, neither of us know; we heard no incantation,” he said, which Alastor would bet a finger or two was a lie. “It left a scar, though — this jagged purple streak that cuts across her stomach. Our Healer had never seen anything like it. She was bedridden for weeks.”

“I see now why your wife did not want this divulged.”

“Yes. If it were her, I expect Winifred wouldn’t, either.”

“No,” said Crouch curtly. “I expect she wouldn’t.”

“They left my wand on the road for me when they Disapparated,” Nott dragged on, filling in the gaps before they could be pointed out. “After all, what good is a Death Eater without a wand? They took Mione’s, though, so she had to get a new one. Her old one wasn’t registered to begin with, since her parents had not wished to risk it leading either of their families to them — not that it made a difference, in the end. The new one came from Mykew Gregorovitch, whom I paid to travel to us. I ensured it was registered to seem like it had been her wand the whole time.”

“You had her records forged, you mean to say.”

“I filled in the blanks.”

It did not bode well that Crouch appeared only exasperated.

“Her parents were careful. Winding up in Hogwarts’ Book of Names is the sole reason the Ministry had any record of her at all,” Nott explained, leaning back, clearly comfortable with the way this interview was going. “Her parents omitted anything that might lead someone to their location: her address, her education, her wand — being underage, it would have been subject to the Trace. They made themselves citizens of the Muggle world; no record of them exists in wizarding Britain, and even Mione herself does not know enough to find that paper trail in France.”

Isn’t that convenient.

“We shall return to this,” Crouch decided. “Tell me more about the aftermath of the attack.”

“Well, it made Mione’s anxiety about the war a thousand times worse, there’s no doubt about that. She didn’t leave the house for over a year, not even to go to Abraxas’s. She didn’t answer her post. She barely ate. How she managed to contract Dragon Pox, we had no idea, though she would’ve been highly susceptible to any disease. I believe now that she was exposed to it very much intentionally by someone whom I let into the house, on orders from You-Know-Who. Perhaps it was Elias, perhaps Geoffrey’s son or one of Edmund’s … even Lucius, under the Imperius … I hardly think it matters anymore, does it? It was punishment, nothing more, nothing less. I was ignoring summons, continued to ignore summons, and as you know, I’ve contracted Dragon Pox before, so it was once again Mione who paid the price. I suspect that was the point. Out of respect for our privacy, our Healer treated her in secret — but, of course, I spotted our Healer’s husband in one of the cells out there, so perhaps respect had nothing to with it.”

“Likely not. But tell me, all that, and you claim that you still refused to participate?”

Nott raised both his eyebrows now.

“You’ve met my wife, Barty. If I had joined the Death Eaters, she would have turned her wand on me herself.”

Crouch gave a slight snort.

“It certainly would have put a strain on your marriage,” he muttered, after a moment, “particularly when she got to scribbling all over a Bill that sought to legalise killing you.”

Nott cracked a smile.

“She’s very cross with you about the recent Amendment, you know,” he said, with a tone that suggested this was merely a conversation between friends, not part of an ongoing criminal investigation. “Expanding the exception to all potential suspects, even, as she keeps pointing out to me, those who are potentially innocent? She’s been up in arms about it all week.”

“So has Winifred — albeit more quietly, I’m sure.”

“Ah, but that is to your face. We both know she does the bulk of her complaining to Morgan Travers.”

Someone with whom Winifred Crouch now had a great deal in common.

“This must be a fucking joke,” said Robards blankly, as Crouch began to explain the fine for lying on an official document (a slap on the wrist exclusive to members of the Wizengamot, of course).

“If it is, it’s not a very good one,” said Vance.

“You ought to be glad you joined the Aurors, young man,” Dixon told Robards stoutly, as she rose to her feet. “If you had wound up in *my* office on your next rotation with the Patrol, you would have found yourself confronted with a long line of distinctly unfunny jokes.” She squeezed Vance’s shoulder, adding, without seemingly a sliver of hope, “Inform me if anything changes, Emmeline, and I’ll let you know if she ever does use that chatterbox,” and made her way out of the chamber.

Robards dropped into her empty chair and stared, confounded.

“What do you believe happened?” he asked Vance. “Truly.”

She rolled her shoulders back, breathing deeply.

“There’s a trauma bond at play here, that is what I believe,” she said, without tearing her eyes from Nott. “I spoke to a traumatised individual today. But this morning I also spoke to someone who spends a great deal of time in Mione’s company. Someone other than a Malfoy. Someone whose family, before she married, did not seem to choose sides. And in the words of Bedelia Avery, ‘Everyone knows Mione’s the one in charge in that house.’”

Alastor snorted without mirth.

“So I spoke to a victim today,” Vance concluded, “but I do not believe I spoke to a victim of Tavaris Nott.”

“Do you believe he’s telling the truth, though? That he was never a Death Eater in practice?”

At last, she turned her head to meet Robards’ gaze.

“I believe you were very helpful today, Gawain. Thank you.”

And then only she and Alastor remained to listen to the hogwash coming from the next room.

“You neglected to mention any scars,” she said. “Did you happen to get a glimpse at the curse one?”

“I don’t make it a habit to stare at a witch’s chest without invitation,” he replied snappishly. “But yeah, I got a glimpse. Just as Nott described. Couldn’t tell you what sort of curse caused

it, though."

Her next question came a minute later, spoken quietly.

"Did he happen to *explain* why we cannot use the Order's own intelligence on this case?"

"Morgan Travers was never a spy," said Alastor, outrage sizzling on his skin, waiting to burst. "She told her daughter's sister-in-law what was up with her friend, and that's it. Nothing about Nott or anybody else. That's rumour, not intel."

"There remains the intel from Snape."

"What intel? He was one of them for a time, don't you forget — probably just as afraid to fall out of her good graces."

Vance sighed and shifted, uncrossing and recrossing her arms.

"The whole time I was speaking to her, Alastor, I felt as if we were going in circles," she confided, "only I wasn't the one leading the way. It was like speaking to a politician."

"A politician, eh? Yet you still reckon she was telling the truth?"

"Too much of it was told too truthfully for the whole to be a lie."

His teeth were clenched too tightly for him to respond other than with a grunt. Scrimgeour seemed to be feeling similarly; his expression had not thawed since he had entered the interrogation room, and his knuckles were now white around his quill as he transcribed. Alas, Crouch was organising his notes and returning stray paperwork to a folder on the table, all too eager to not be proven wrong about another person in his life.

"I shall need to confirm this all with her," he told Nott seriously. "Have my Aurors speak to the other names you mentioned. But if all goes well, there is a chance you may be home in time to join Mione and Theodore for dinner."

"Assuming our dinner table remains whole."

"Tavaris —"

"No, no, I understand, you did what you must," said Nott, with a restricted wave of dismissal. "I must warn you, though, Mione isn't likely to be in an agreeable mood after the events of this morning, so do keep your wand secure when you see her; she may be armed."

Crouch terminated the interview chuckling, and this alone was simply too much to take sitting down; Alastor heaved himself back up from his seat, a fuming steam of breath coming out from where his nose used to be.

"*Alastor*," said Vance, in a warning voice, "if Crouch deems him innocent then there is nothing we —"

He stormed out of the chamber before she could finish that wretched sentence and met Crouch and Scrimgeour in the corridor. Without breaking stride, he snapped, “Mind if I have a minute with him?”

“Return him to his cell when you’re done,” said Crouch.

Alastor wrenched open the door to Interrogation Room 2.

At his entrance, Nott straightened, inhaling deeply, and Alastor thought, pleased, that he might finally let his complaisant façade slip.

Maddeningly, Alastor thought wrong.

“Is that a prosthetic?” Nott asked, pointing vaguely. “I don’t believe I’ve ever seen one for an eye,” he added, in a distant murmur, “certainly not one that looks like that.”

It took Alastor a moment to recognise the expression on his face for what it was: sheer, unbridled curiosity. Most people were disturbed by it, a handful were morbidly fascinated, but Nott stared at his magical eye as though he wanted nothing more than to dissect it.

“Well, this one’s a bit special,” Alastor said. “And the old one was never returned, see, unlike in the case of all Benjy Fenwick’s bits. Reckon I wasn’t deemed worthy of that generosity … But maybe *you* could tell me where to find my eye, eh, Nott?”

“Ah, I don’t know where it is, I’m afraid,” said Nott blithely. “Terribly sorry.”

With a growl, Alastor whipped out the Sneakoscope and slammed it down on the table. He then leaned over it, planting his fists on the surface and getting right up in Nott’s face.

“That was quite the tale you told Crouch, but I don’t believe it for a *second*,” he snarled. “You may walk away from here today a free man, Nott, but I’ll be watching you, you can count on that. However long it takes, I’ll see to it that you’re behind bars for good.”

“With both eyes, Auror Moody?” asked Nott. “Will you be watching me with both eyes?”

Between them, the Sneakoscope kept spinning.

“Tavaris Nott is far from an easy man to fool,” Albus Dumbledore had warned the night before, when Alastor had brought him a warrant to sign. “Unlike his master, he will never tell you that he’s outsmarted you; he will play along until you realise the ruse has long been up, and he will relish in every minute of it.”

As the dim final light sank behind the treetops that day on an estate some one-hundred-and-twenty-seven miles away, where all but the wind was still, and all but its rustling was silent, a pair of shovels dug deep beneath the ground, unmanned, a pile of cold, hardened dirt growing steadily nearby.

Tavaris and Mione Nott sat together on a bench before a frigid and weathered headstone whose inscription had long ago been crept upon by brittle, leafless vines.

Hulda Nott Gaunt

d. Saturday after Beltane 3 the Great Plague

Under the cover of darkness, the grave was revealed; the shovels fell, and a rotted casket rose into the air to allow the rise of another, which landed gracefully on the grass. With a spell, it flew open; inside were all manner of items, from tomes and journals to correspondence and photographs, to stoppered vials of potion and jars of ingredients, and finally, to a set of black robes and a bone-white mask.

Setting his drink aside, Tavaris Nott reached into the casket, searching, and withdrew one leather-bound journal adorned with a crest. He flipped to a page roughly in the middle and held it for his wife to see, the script illuminated by a lamp hovering overhead.

Circumquaque Disperdet (translation: 'destroy all around'): wand movement involves a wide, horizontal arc and projects a burst of golden-yellow light. Results in: a uniquely damaging explosion with an approximately sixty-yard radius, however a one-yard radius of protection from the point at which it is cast, so keeping the caster unharmed; all those struck are wiped out within seconds, perhaps even milliseconds.

Understanding did not dawn; rather, it solidified.

"A finger," he scoffed, anger rising off his breath. "That fucking rat is still alive … isn't he?"

Mione Nott was quiet and ashen-faced at his shoulder.

"Well, then," he said, shutting the journal, "it seems we have yet another friend whom we ought to pay a visit."

"Meaning?" she asked.

"You and I, darling, shall be going to Azkaban, after all."

Chapter End Notes

> This chapter has been written so many times, in so many POVs, that if it wasn't so important, I would've scrapped it out of frustration. I now know far more about criminal investigations and interrogation methods than I hope I'll ever need to.

Regarding the chapter title, the term “duping delight” refers to the smile that a suspect wears when they’re getting away with it.

As for the headstone, “Hulda” is the name of a sorceress in Norse mythology, and in Old Norse, means “hiding” and “secrecy,” and the date is the third year of the Black Plague, called the Great Plague at the time, and Beltane was usually celebrated around May the first, so it was May 1349 (they marked the date this way, except by the year of the current king’s reign, so I improvised).

The Words of a Voiceless Wizard

Chapter Summary

> Oh, Mother, I can feel the soil falling over my head
> See, the sea wants to take me
> The knife wants to slit me
> Do you think you can help me?
> — I Know it's Over, The Smiths

Chapter Notes

> This chapter contains a quote from Chapter 27, Padfoot Returns, of Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire. Of course, all rights belong to JKR.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the aftermath, clouds of ashy grey were broken apart vengefully, their dissipation ordered and executed, with determination, one particle at a time, clearing the sky of all unwelcome to allow forth the sun after the dark period survived, by some, without the bright warmth of its beam.

Here, however, the storm raged on, unforgiving, and would rage on for many years more.

The air was frigid, the winds harsh, and each spray of seawater was akin to a thousand shivers suddenly materialised. The wooden benches were perpetually damp, the deck awash in thin puddles that froze over in visible increments, and the guiding light of the lamp on a post at the bow dimmed the closer the boat got to its destination, finally going out when it shuddered to a stop at a rickety dock.

Despite what many may have believed, very few people were made seasick by the journey; in reality, it was the sight of the massive iron tower looming over the pebbled shore that incited illness, and this illness lingered until one left the island altogether.

Alas, most never did.

“Mind yer step gettin’ out,” the captain said as he moored the boat, his voice as dull as the rest of him. “Wouldna believe how many of ‘em fall in.”

The sole response to this was a snigger no less dull from a gaunt-faced Hitwizard who stood waiting on the dock, dressed in a stiff, steel-coloured uniform with black buttons that went

nearly to his chin. He had his wand raised and lit at the tip, for only a magical torch could persist in a place like this.

Tavaris stepped off carefully, planting the foot of his good leg on the dock first, then heaving his other up with the aid of his walking-stick. The hood of his long black cloak was blown back as he straightened, returning the Hitwizard's nod of greeting.

"Nott," the Hitwizard grunted.

"Burke," Tavaris returned. He tilted his head in the direction of the boat. Quick to cotton on, the Hitwizard approached it and stuck out one gloved hand.

Grateful, for there seemed to be a sudden lack of bones in her legs, Hermione grasped it with her own and was helped off. The heels of her dragonhide boots slid on the dock's icy, splintered planks.

"Daemon Burke, Mrs Nott," the Hitwizard introduced himself, squeezing her hand and letting it go.

Hermione's gaze drifted towards the rough tide as it came barrelling ashore on the other side of the dock in waves that seemed to reach a metre in height at their peak. She recalled a headline from the summer before last, about the body of a human guard — a member of the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol — that had washed up on this very shore. She had been shocked to see it in print, not because it had happened but because she had struggled to believe the Ministry of Magic would ever allow such information to be made public, especially amidst ministerial elections, when the news would have rebuked every claim of security made by the candidates. She would never have allowed it herself.

But, of course, *The Daily Prophet* had been under someone else's influence when the news had reached publication. Someone who would have known regardless of whether the Ministry had covered it up or not.

Daemon Burke made a gesture to the captain, then jerked his chin over his shoulder. "Follow me."

Someone who, most conveniently, had another of the human guards on his payroll to lure the wizard away from his post and onto the boat without raising the alarm.

Tavaris was the one responsible for that wizard's death, Hermione realised, more shaken by this than she ought to have been. She had borne witness to that green light, after all, for the second that it had enveloped the entire hall of the Nott Estate; she had heard the implication and the near admittance that had followed it; and if that weren't enough, she had later stepped over the body of Argo Pyrites, sprawled lifelessly before the stairs.

With a trembling breath, she forced herself to put her back to the sea and started after Tavaris as Burke led them down the dock and onto the shore.

The sun had been on the precipice of setting back on the mainland, but so colourless was the island that it was impossible to tell. Even the clouds could not be made out, for they blended

too closely with the grey sky. It was as though the whole place had been drained of life. In a way, it had been, evidenced in the most literal sense by the vast collection of unsympathetically plain and sparingly inscribed headstones which formed an unorderly, borderless cemetery on the southern-most point. The visible indifference to the dead never failed to chill, each headstone unornamented, for no one buried beneath them had retained the love of another enough to have a wreath of flowers set upon their final resting place.

In silence, the three of them proceeded along a short, unmarked, and uneven path, their every step tracked by the hollow gazes circulating overhead. Tavaris peered up covertly, blank-faced in his wariness. He grasped Hermione's wrist and drew her closer to himself, inciting a shudder that she tried her best to supress.

There was no sign nor plaque within the tower's gaping mouth of an entrance, but a few words had been carved into the exterior wall beside the large doors, which, together, read: *Azkaban Prison, est. 1718.*

"It was actually built sometime in the fifteenth century, you know," Hermione said, hearing the nerves evident in her voice, "by a Dark wizard called Ekrizdis. He lured Muggle sailors here to be tortured to death."

Tavaris gave a short hum of intrigue.

"Refrain from drawing your wands once we're inside," Burke warned, tactfully not calling them out on their stalling. "The Dementors'll not take kindly to that."

"Is there anything a Dementor *would* take kindly to?" asked Tavaris rhetorically.

"Your soul on a platter," answered Hermione, regardless.

"I should warn them the flavour is hardly delightful."

Burke put out his torch. He flourished his wand and said, in a murmur so monotone that it was a wonder it had any effect, "*Expecto Patronum*."

A silvery, translucent fox emerged from the tip of his wand to illuminate the doors, which scraped dreadfully against the rocks as they were opened. Inside, free from the wind but not the chill, was a lightless room with a long counter on one side, where a Wand Weigher awaited all visitors. At the arrival of the Patronus, a dark, swirling blur disappeared through a door between the tall steel cabinets behind it.

"You realise this method only stirs further distrust," said Hermione, looking at Burke. "They're highly unlikely to ever accept you back here after this."

"They'll not need to," he replied, pulling open one of the doors at the other end of the room. He led them on into the hall beyond. "Next week, the Ministry'll stop posting a human guard at the docks again, and they'll have the Aurors to spare for escorting people. Won't need a Hitwizard to do the job."

He continued straight ahead to an old, rusting lift, sparing no glance to the cloaked figures lurking outside the glow of the Patronus.

"He'll be at the top," he told Hermione and Tavaris as they joined him in the lift, the grilles slamming swiftly shut at their heels. "Best to hang on to something," he added, pressing the topmost button, and with no further warning, the lift shot up with a deafening *SCREECH*, which continued shrilly whilst they all clutched the grilles and did not stop until the lift did so itself several minutes later.

The Patronus exited first, causing the fleshless faces that had come to press themselves against the grilles to disperse.

Trotting a metre in front of Burke, the Patronus showed the three of them down a tunnel-like corridor whose walls captured and echoed the cries emitting from the cells on either side. The cries soon quieted, however, as the Patronus passed, lighting up the already sallow faces of their owners.

"And where might *your* chains be, Nott? Perhaps my mind is playing tricks on me, but you appear to be walking rather freely."

"There's plenty of room for you to join us!"

"If he does, the Dark Lord may just decide not to kill him for his treachery."

Tavaris strode on, ignoring the three Lestranges. Bellatrix slipped her hand between the bars to seize the hem of Hermione's cloak, just barely missing it.

Hermione skittered further out of reach, promptly startling at another outstretched hand on her left. This one did not attempt to grab her; instead, it waved, a mocking, flirtatious dance of pale fingers. When her eyes travelled up his arm and arrived at his long, twisted face, Antonin Dolohov sneered at her.

"Tavaris?" said a gruff voice up ahead. "Tavaris, where's my father? How come he's not here? *He should be here*!"

Hermione hastened to catch up to Tavaris and Burke, looking away when she met the vengeful gaze of Eamon Travers, and quickening her steps, her throat constricting, when she spotted Augustus Rookwood, who sent her a wink.

When she reached Angus Mulciber's cell, her feet slowed.

His knuckles were white around the iron bars, his eyes wide with panic, and he was now mumbling to himself, "He should be here … should be here … Where is he?"

"Mione!" someone gasped, and she spun on the spot, her heart leaping in her chest, to find Barty Crouch Jr scampering on his hands and knees towards the bars of his own cell. He used them to wrench himself to his feet. "Mione, you must get my mother! You must tell her to come for me! I can't — I can't be here!"

Hermione stared, her mouth hanging open in horror. He reached out for her desperately, not to seize, she thought, but to hold or be held, his face wet with tears and his shoulders shaking profusely. Somewhere in the distance, she could have sworn she heard the echo of a *bang*.

"I beg you, Mione, please — p—please, I can't do this," said Barty frantically, "I thought I could but I — I won't last another day, I'm sure of it! You must get her, you must, *she needs to take me home*!"

She stayed there, staring still, for a moment more, as the cloaked figures at the end of the corridor crept closer, stealing inch after inch of space the second the light left it.

And then Tavaris turned back to pull her away.

"Do not interact," he bent his head to whisper, his fingers once more wrapped firmly around her wrist. "It will be worse if you do."

"*Mione*, *please*!"

"Do you still have it?"

She slipped a hand inside her cloak to feel for the scrap of parchment that Tavaris had scrawled on and tucked into her pocket before they had left the Nott Estate.

"Yes," she whispered.

Burke was waiting outside a cell on the right, roughly two metres down from Barty's, his Patronus sniffing about at his feet. As they neared, he turned to aim his wand at the large iron lock that hung, without clear purpose, on one of the bars at the far end of the cell. It *clicked* open a second later, and once removed, a slim, barred door shivered into sight.

"Ready?" he asked Hermione, gripping the doorhandle.

She doubted that she ever would be. Nevertheless, she gave him a shaky nod, and he heaved open the door. She slipped into the cell, flinching slightly when he closed it back up behind her. The door blended seamlessly back into the bars, as if it had never existed.

"Well, well, well … look who's popped in for a visit."

"Hi, Sirius," she said weakly.

Against the opposite wall of the cell, barren save for its filth and a single bucket, Sirius was practically lounging, his legs extended in front of him and his arms crossed over his chest. The striped uniform he had on was not soiled nor frayed, worn for fourteen days thus far, rather than for twelve years.

"In all this time, you've never once sought me out," he said, his voice rough and drawling, "and now here you are, braving Azkaban to do it. Must be important, whatever it is you've come for. I don't imagine it's because you missed me."

Hermione turned away, swallowing thickly.

With a warning communicated through a single hard look, Tavaris passed his own wand to her through the bars.

It was a deal that they had struck the night before, and one that had taken much convincing. She had waited until he had finished his second drink — the stage at which he was most agreeable — to even risk asking, and by the time he had poured his fourth (though not yet drunk it, thankfully), he had conceded her point; Sirius would not speak if he knew Tavaris was listening.

She stalled for a couple of seconds, relishing the wand's warmth against her palm — far greater than it had been the last time she had held it — before waving it over the width of the bars, murmuring, "*Muffliato*," and passing it back.

Taking a deep breath, she joined Sirius on the grimy floor. The stench made her eyes water, though she pretended not to notice it.

"Tavaris would like you to confirm something for him."

"Would he, now?" said Sirius coldly. He shot a glance behind her, his upper lip curling into a small sneer. "And what might that be?"

Hermione removed the scrap of parchment from her cloak, unfolded it carefully, and slid it across the floor.

"That this is indeed the spell that was used to kill those twelve Muggles."

Sirius' brow furrowed slightly as he picked it up.

"*Circumquaque Disperdet*," he read aloud. His expression instantly grew a hundred times colder. "Oh, yeah. This is the one."

She nodded, having expected this. Without preamble, she began to explain. "It was created by Torsten Nott."

"My, what a staggering coincidence," said Sirius sarcastically.

"For four generations," she persisted, "it's remained in the Nott family — never published, never passed on — with just two exceptions." She looked at him regretfully. "It was intended to be used as a failsafe. That's why Tavaris taught it to him."

And to Barty, but she saw little purpose in mentioning that.

"In the event that he was discovered, Peter was to take out everyone within a sixty-yard radius of him — anyone who could've seen or overheard. Due to the spell's one-yard radius of protection from the point of casting, he could do it without also taking himself out in the process."

The parchment crinkled in Sirius' fist.

"You were standing within that one-yard radius," said Hermione, pained, "weren't you?"

“Well, it was all very unplanned, you see. I didn’t think to grab my measuring tape before heading out,” he said snidely. “But I was definitely close enough to watch him cut off his own finger and scamper off to join his friends in the sewer.”

“He’s still alive, then,” she said, not bothering to sound surprised. “Tavaris suspected as much.”

Sirius’ cool, grey eyes bore an eerie gleam.

“How long have you known?”

She winced, her insides clenching with guilt.

“He was Marked the first weekend of February last year. I saw him again for the first time a week before. January the twenty-sixth.”

“January the twenty-sixth?” repeated Sirius. “Of last year? Is that not right around the day that —?” He cut himself off, his nostrils flaring.

“The day that everyone learned about the prophecy?” she finished for him. “It is. But Peter came in the morning, before it had been created, so his decision had nothing to do with it.”

Sirius drew his legs up to drape his arms over his knees.

“Are you telling me,” he started, low and halting, “that night, after Dumbledore told us, when we were all reassuring … when we were all promising them that they’d be … Wormtail had already gone and thrown himself at You-Know-Who’s feet *that fucking morning*?”

“Yes,” said Hermione.

Sirius lurched forwards off the wall with a growled curse, his face contorting with rage. He balled up the scrap of parchment and hurled it over her head. Had she not already known his aim was precise, she would have believed he had meant for it to hit her face.

She peered over her shoulder to find the crumpled parchment now on the other side of the bars. Tavaris nudged it closer to himself with the toe of his boot and bent slightly to retrieve it, making clear that he knew the hit had been wholly intentional — and that he was wholly unphased, despite its success. He carried on conversing with Burke in low tones.

“You two must’ve had yourselves a jolly good time laughing together behind our backs,” Sirius sneered, glaring at Hermione. “Welcomed him with open fucking arms, no doubt.”

“I was sent out of the room for screaming at him, actually.”

He blinked, stilling, most of his weight having shifted to his bare feet, planted firmly on the floor, as if, a second ago, he had been intending to pounce on her.

“The Dark Lord wanted Peter trained properly, so he brought him round to introduce to Tavaris, since Tavaris is in charge of overseeing that,” said Hermione, gathering the burgundy fabric of her cloak to hold it around herself like a barrier. “And — well — Peter claimed I

didn't have a right to say anything about his being there because I had chosen to be there, too, and — and I told him — or I screamed, rather — that …" She sucked in a breath, held it, and finished all in a rush. "I explained to him that I couldn't possibly have chosen to be there because if I had chosen to be there then I would still have my wand and I would also have memories of how my son was conceived and I wasn't supposed to say those sorts of things, especially not scream them, so I was ordered to leave."

There was a beat of silence, then another, and then —

"I just watched you use a wand."

"You did," she acknowledged, in a strained voice, "and that was the first time I've used one since I got a new one last May — in preparation, I believe, for the Yule Gala. I haven't seen my old wand since I was taken from Hogwarts. My school trunk was returned to me two weeks ago in case we were raided — so it wouldn't seem like it had been withheld — and my wand wasn't in there. I don't know what happened to it. I don't know what happened to my … to my r—ring, either." This time, she could not swallow, so she looked away and tried clearing her throat instead. She wound up coughing. "When I asked him, Tavaris pretended not to know what I was talking about."

She looked back at Sirius to watch his chest expand with his next breath, his body so full of tension that his shoulders appeared to be vibrating. The realisation seemed to reach him then; now, and never again, she would provide real answers to his questions.

After all, who could he possibly tell?

"You said you and Nott had been writing to each other while you were at Hogwarts," he said first. "Is that true?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "We forged correspondence, though, for the Aurors to find. I didn't speak to him until I was reciting vows with Abraxas Malfoy's wand at my back."

Sirius had already been pale, but now he looked ghostly.

"Who manages your post?"

"Tavaris — or one of the elves, more likely. In all the time I've lived at the Nott Estate, I have never once seen an owl. I only just learnt where they're kept, in case I was questioned on it."

"The letters you wrote, back when —"

"I didn't write those," said Hermione. "I only copied them."

Sirius rocked back on his heels until he was once more sat on the ground with his back against the wall.

"You've stayed there this whole time," he said. "Why?"

“Blood Wards,” she said shortly. “Although I’m no longer restricted by them myself, the same cannot be said of my son. I did try to escape once — the first night — it didn’t much go in anyone’s favour. As you may have noticed, that’s about the same time that Tavaris began using a walking-stick.” She shot an anxious glance behind her. “Sirius, listen, we haven’t much time —”

“You were seen leaving your own party on You-Know-Who’s arm,” Sirius interrupted, and he sounded imploring, as though now that she was telling the truth, he wanted her to lie to him again.

For better or for worse, she answered honestly.

“When you’re wandless in a room of sixty of his supporters with your son asleep upstairs, you do exactly as the Dark Lord bids you to.”

His exhale had a vaguely hysterical note to it.

Hermione hesitated, her heart beginning to race.

“There’s another reason I came here today,” she confessed, with a slight tremor in her voice. “I have something for you.”

Very carefully, her eyes darting to the bars to verify that Tavaris was still occupied whispering to Burke, she drew her cloak out of the way and grasped the hems of her robes and skirt. Sirius watched her closely, his eyes narrowed. As she started rucking up the fabric, the tremor reaching her fingers, he leaned forwards over his knees, better shielding her actions from view.

“I wish I could’ve used that old garter-belt trick for this, even though it’s proved itself so risky in the past,” she said, speaking quickly, “however, I recently discovered that they had all been removed from my wardrobe at some point, so I had to resort to a rather more improvised method of attachment.”

She rolled one cotton stocking down over her knee, and at last, revealed it, strapped to her thigh with roughly half a roll of Spellotape.

The letter was no longer white, for months spent bearing close witness to each cold sweat to trickle down her spine had caused it to wear and yellow. It had lost its crispness, too, now bent oddly, and in odd places, first from being tucked under a sofa cushion, second from the bones of every corset that had enclosed it, third from being squashed into the back of a picture frame, and lastly, from hiding in another frame, which displayed prints of five tiny fingers and five tiny toes, and which had spent the last two weeks in a casket six-feet underground.

Hermione was barely breathing now, too scared to make much of a noise, regardless of the Muffling Charm. Sirius’ breath, too, was halting; a short, rancid wave of heat brushing the side of her face. The tremor worsened as she pulled on the first bit of tape. At the sound of tearing on skin, she looked back to ensure neither Tavaris nor Burke had heard.

“The sixth floor, you said?” Tavaris was clarifying, so quietly she could barely make out his words, and Burke nodded his head, his gaze focused someplace further down the corridor.

Bracing herself, she yanked.

“Your mother has been writing to me, you know,” she said, partly to distract herself from the pain as she raced to unwind the many layers of tape. “Asking me to tea.”

“Is that what this is, then?” asked Sirius, in a strange voice. “A letter from my mother?”

She shook her head.

“From your brother.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw his gaze drop back to the letter, his expression inscrutable.

“Regulus is dead,” he said flatly.

“He is. I’m sorry.” Hermione hissed through her teeth at a particularly large tear. Hurriedly, she said, “He gave this to me a few days before he died — asked if I’d do him the favour of delivering it if — if I ever got the chance. I’ve kept it hid—”

“Mione, darling.”

Her heart stopped. Slowly, she turned her head.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Tavaris asked, in a dangerously light voice. He held her gaze so intently that it was as if he were daring her to break it.

He was too tall, she realised, and she did so much too late; there was no way to sufficiently shield her actions when he could see over their heads.

“Open the cell.”

She tore off the last of the long strip as Burke aimed his wand at the bars. The first “*S*” and “*I*” of Sirius’ name, printed with such care, were removed by the tape, and more tape dangled messily from the letter, catching on her clothes as Sirius knocked her hands aside to free it the very second that the cell door was wrenched open, slamming against the bars with a *CLANG* of metal that reverberated against her every nerve-ending —

“Got it.”

As soon as the words left Sirius’ mouth, Hermione was shooting to her feet and barrelling straight into Tavaris as he reached the threshold, her hands outstretched to shove him back, and instead grasping, with pure luck, his wand, sticking out a pocket of his robes as if he had considered it more secure than that of his cloak.

With a choked gasp, she ducked under his arm and out of the cell, aiming before she was even upright.

Burke had his wand on her in a second. He appeared unsure as to whether he should, however, and glanced questioningly at Tavaris, who stood still between the bars, moving no further into the cell.

"Do you truly wish to play this game with me right now, Mione?" he asked, in almost a whisper. "Here?"

"It's only a letter, Tavaris," said Hermione breathlessly.

He let out a mirthless laugh.

"Why, only a letter!"

"*Yes*! It's over — what secret missive could I possibly pass on that would be of any use at this point?" she said, as, just as she had hoped, Sirius took advantage of the stalemate to tear open the letter.

All she needed to do was keep Tavaris' eyes on her.

"Even if there was, I'd certainly know better than to —"

"Would you? Would you know —?"

"You *know* I'd know better," she said coldly, glaring at him. "You know how I learned."

Tavaris did not refute this.

"Who is it from, then?" he demanded.

"I swear, not anyone who'd concern —"

"*Who is the fucking letter from, Mione*?" he demanded again, and this time he shouted it, stepping towards her and away from the cell.

She backed up hastily.

"Merely his brother!" she cried.

At this, Tavaris stopped. His eyebrows rose very slowly.

"Regulus Black has been dead for almost two years," he said, after a moment, his voice once more a near whisper. "Do you mean to tell me … that you have kept this letter hidden … all this time?"

There was nothing Hermione could say that would lessen whatever reaction was currently building inside of him.

He took another step towards her.

"Get that fucking letter," he snapped at Burke, and in a split-second decision, she did something that would not only fail to lessen that building reaction, but that would make it a

hundred times worse.

Because Regulus Black deserved to have his last words to his family read, and his family deserved to read them.

"*Colloportus*! *Expelliarmus*!"

The cell door sealed itself shut as Burke's wand flew from his hand; at once, the Patronus vanished, plunging them into darkness.

"Catch me if you can," said Hermione, and she took off running.

The howling chorus of cracked laughter was a thing of might, rising from one cell to the next and following her down the shadowy corridor. As she ran, she thought hard to herself, *Flammafrigus*; bluebell flames emerged from the tip of Tavaris' wand, forming a fistful of cool light, which she sent hurling over her shoulder to slip into Sirius' cell.

Behind her, she heard Tavaris yelling at Burke, and then, inevitably, the rapid *thudding* of his walking-stick as he started after her.

But he could only go so fast, these days.

She turned sharply when she sensed the end of the corridor, the icy fabric of a cloak ghosting against the back of her hand. In the span of that single breath, the laughter transformed into a sickening symphony, suddenly accompanied by chords struck in perfect harmony to thunderous *BOOMS* and *THUDS*, and by keys that matched every high note of a multitude of screams.

She sealed her lips shut and streaked past where she knew the lift to be, lighting the tip of Burke's wand as she went and washing away the memory of a very different sort of darkness: a powdery black which clung to the panelled walls and seeped across the floorboards, cloaking all that might have been in sight.

Her forearm itched, begging to be scratched. Ignoring it, she took another turn, then quickly another, guiding herself along an indirect path to the other side of the floor.

It was ironic, really, that Tavaris should be the one of the two of them who would wind up here, whilst, in this match, it was Hermione who had the home advantage.

She travelled down a new line of cells, all of them, like that of Sirius, inhumanely empty.

Many changes had been made to Azkaban Prison since the end of the Second Wizarding War in 1998, and this was one of them. By 2001, each cell had been given a cot, and by 2003, a desk and a chair, too. Plumbing remained an expense for which few were willing to lighten their pockets, but the buckets had been replaced with chamber pots, and a basin had been provided for washing. The most challenging to gain approval for had been the quills, due to the fear that they may be used as weapons. As was the case with all the rest, the deciding factor had been the Muggle-borns, who had experienced the enforced mindlessness of

Azkaban for themselves, and who — at least in their majority — had not wished it on even the people who had put them there.

It had taken until 2009 for post to be permitted, each letter or package checked first by an Auror and a multitude of Dark Detectors. Finally, however, the prisoners had been given the opportunity to speak to someone besides themselves and — if they still retained the strength for it — each other.

"It's h—happened, Rowle!" someone cried from a cell on the left. "I've begun to see things!"

"Well, then ask her to put the light out, Gibbon!"

Hermione kept herself moving, not daring to slow for a second. A new noise was giving chase now, one far more sinister than that of Tavaris' walking-stick.

Bang ... bang ... bang ...

Another change — or, in truth, an attempt at one.

The dust had not yet settled when Kingsley Shacklebolt had called for their removal. It had been swift, the approval and execution both, for all too fresh had been the memory of those Dark creatures being enticed by another who dealt in souls.

In hindsight, it should have been predicted; it had, after all, been foretold.

Upon the death of its cruel creator, the Concealment Charms which had occluded the island had collapsed, revealing its existence to the rest of the wizarding world. Without yet a clear use, it had been left to rot for over two centuries, empty save for the death and despair of the murdered sailors that had seeped into the very bones of the structure itself. Thus, the island had long been infested by the time that Minister for Magic Damocles Rowle had converted the uncovered fortress to a prison, and its undead residents to guards. So soon a place of unspeakable horror, his predecessor, Eldritch Diggory, had demanded those residents be removed; however, so unspeakable the horrors in which this could result, he had met only opposition.

It had been a fear shared by all: what would the Dementors do if they were cut off from their food source?

Starving, they had sought sustenance elsewhere. East rather than west, and so migrating to another shore along the North Sea. Within a week of their banishment, six Danish fishermen had been found without their souls intact. As the summer had worn on, more and more of their victims had been identified by wizarding authorities — incarcerated Muggles, patients of a psychiatric hospital, and, worst of all, school children, high-spirited on a playground.

At last, in August, the Dementors had found themselves a true feast further north in Norway, in a place where emotions, especially happy ones, were at their strongest, and in their greatest quantity: the Quidditch World Cup.

The International Confederation of Wizards had stepped in then, and a deal most undesirable had been struck.

Hermione came skidding to a halt before a pair of iron doors, sealed securely shut. The noise grew in volume, gaining on her.

Bang ... bang ... bang ...

She pointed Tavaris' wand at the doors and thought determinedly, *Alohomora*. There was a *click*, and she pulled on one doorhandle, successfully slipping inside just swiftly enough to only catch the start of a sentence: her own words, spoken in her own voice, years ago and years away still.

"Theodore Nott, you have been found —"

With another spell, she sealed the doors shut behind her, buying herself a sliver more of time. She then turned, panting, to face the block of cells kept more secure than any other within the prison. By far the most inhumane, for its prisoners were not, by most, considered human.

Heavy chains *clunked* and *rattled* and scraped against the floors from behind the solid, impenetrable walls of the cells. Through the glinting silver bars of a small slit of a window on the left, a pair of luminous eyes peered out at her.

These cells, in the future, were used solely for the full moon.

Panting still, Hermione used Tavaris' wand to snap the heels off her boots, shoved them into her pocket, and took off once more.

She scarcely heard the doors when they opened behind her, the blood thundering through her ears, but the voice — her voice — was perfectly clear.

"Theodore Nott, you have been found guilty by the Council of Magical Law of creation and possession of an unregistered —"

"Stop it," she muttered to herself, a stinging in her eyes and a burning in her lungs, "stop it … stop …"

She tried to think of her favourite things, and instead was forced to wonder if Theodore had tried to think of his favourite things, too, when the sun had gone down on his first night. Had he been imagining raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens when the Dementors had crept in, salivating over the memory of a lullaby?

They kept their distance during the day, and they did not take what they need not, but when the sun sunk below the surface of the thrashing water, the Aurors guarded the entrance, and the Dementors once more haunted the halls. Every several years, their restraint was rewarded with a Kiss, to ensure they would maintain it. Someone already at Death's door, with the singular exception of Delphini Riddle, who had nearly put them all on that doorstep, with a device of Theodore's own making.

It was as if the gavel was aiming for Hermione's heels.

Bang ... bang ... bang ...

When she emerged from the block, escaping through a second pair of doors and down another cold, unbending corridor, it was Sirius' voice that she heard speaking in her head.

"Nasty little shock for old Barty, I'd imagine. Should have spent a bit more time at home with his family, shouldn't he? Ought to have left the office early once in a while ... gotten to know his own son."

Guilt dug its claws into her shoulders, attempting to slow her sprint and drag her backwards into its arms. This was her penance, it told her; how dare she endeavour to outrun it after sentencing so many others to their own? How dare she be so arrogant, so hypocritical, when she, too, dealt in souls?

You are going to die, anyway, it whispered, like an inside joke.

Distantly, Hermione recognised that she was sobbing. Straight lines wobbled and the light of Burke's wand wavered with the onslaught of tears, each one hardening on her cheeks, freezing amidst its fall. Half-blind, she forged on, fighting to ignore the conjured image of Rose and Hugo, and of Ron and Harry, all standing before an unsympathetically plain and sparingly inscribed headstone.

As if they will know where to find your body.

She turned right a final time and had at last returned to where she had begun.

Laughter no longer rung out, for the Dementors were doing their job of punishing all those who had dared succumb to cheer. Screams and wails now filled the corridor, and she could not decipher which of them were real — a struggle in which she was not alone.

"I had to do it! I *had* to!"

"It wasn't his fault, Father; he was only playing!"

"You mustn't — you ungrateful — *ANDROMEDA*!"

"*Please*, *Mother*! *Please, forgive me*!"

Burke was standing outside of Sirius' cell, clinging weakly to one of the bars. A Dementor hovered at his shoulder, looming over him like a raincloud darkening with the promise of a storm.

As she neared, her steps finally slowing, Hermione looked towards Sirius, whose face was ashen under the light of the bluebell flames. Held loosely in his hand was the letter, read.

She sensed the Dementor that had been chasing her now closing in from behind, and she strode forwards purposefully to surrender both wands to Burke, who let go of the bar to take them. He shoved Tavaris' wand into his pocket and pointed his own at the iron lock, opening it with a *click* that now sent a shock shooting up her spine; she twitched with it, and her left arm spasmed still as Burke entered the cell to wrestle Regulus' letter out of Sirius' grasp.

The next second, a long-fingered hand of rotted flesh appeared out of the corner of Hermione's eye. Its presence in the air alone was tangible enough to make her flinch, but she did not dare allow herself to move any more than that; she knew better.

A painful shudder ran through her body when the hand landed on her shoulder, encasing her in a cold dread: an all-consuming feeling of defeat, even though she had succeeded in what she had set out to do.

The corridor slipped away. Too suddenly, she was gazing down at a chair whose armrests were adorned with chains, and which was positioned at the centre of a marble floor and surrounded by rows upon rows of largely unoccupied benches, each one rising in level to meet the black stone walls that enclosed the vast underground room …

"Theodore Nott, you have been found guilty by the Council of Magical Law of creation and possession of an unregistered time-device with intent to alter time and assault with intent to resist arrest. I hereby sentence you to eight years in Azkaban Prison."

The bang *of the gavel echoed throughout the closed courtroom. The Council of Magical Law began filing out as Head Auror Terry Boot rose to escort Theodore Nott back to the holding cells to await transfer.*

"Time to say your good-byes," Terry said.

SLAM!

Blearily, Hermione watched the cell door shiver out of existence once more. Burke turned away, Regulus' letter in hand, and began to follow the hovering Dementor down the corridor.

It hit her then, her eyes darting frantically to meet Sirius' gaze, that this was the last time she would ever see him.

Although it had not yet happened, she had already lived that night in the Shrieking Shack, when she and Harry had so seamlessly skipped through time to save him; she had already lived those conversations shared through the fireplace in Gryffindor Tower, as well as those ventures to the cave outside Hogsmeade Village, lugging a basket of food more appetising than the rats with which he had been sustaining himself; and she had already lived that summer at Number 12 Grimmauld Place and the Christmas there that had followed it — his last Christmas. Even his death, she had already lived, although she had been unconscious at the time.

The scarce light flickered and weakened, threatening to dissolve; just as she and Sirius were not eternal, nor were the bluebell flames floating overhead.

The Dementor at her back started to push. Hermione dug her heels in, racing to find the right words to say good-bye. Alas, the right words did not exist, and in the end, she just said, "I'm glad I got the chance to know you."

Sirius tipped his head to her and replied, grimly, "Good luck to you, Mione."

She could not bear to turn away by choice — to select the second she would stop knowing him for good — so she did not choose at all; she made her body go lax, and then instead, it was the prodding of the Dementor that propelled her onwards. As soon as Sirius was out of sight, she went willingly after Burke.

"Mione!" Barty cried out again as she passed his cell. "Mione, you will tell her, won't you? You *will* tell my mother to come take me home. Right? *Right*?"

Part of Hermione wished to apologise to him. Perhaps it was because he was not the one whom she was truly seeing in that moment, standing behind those bars and begging for his mother. Or perhaps it was because she knew him in a way that she had never expected nor intended to: as a boy who had come knocking on her door for help getting rid of hickeys, because he was a boy who loved other boys, and some thought this a worser crime than anything else he had done.

But she did not apologise, because Barty had never done so to Neville, and Frank and Alice Longbottom would no longer understand an apology even if one was offered to them. Just as the Prewett twins could no longer hear one, nor the McKinnons, nor any of the others, whose killers were not here, not yet. Some of them never would be, and from this thought, Hermione spiralled, her body weighing down so heavily that she felt somehow welded to the floor even as her feet kept lifting to move across it.

A handful of them would sit on the Wizengamot and push back when she spoke of reform. Some would donate to the charities she promoted but shake her hand only whilst wearing gloves. One would even treat patients at St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. But it was all of them who would walk freely among the rest, unknown for their crimes.

If only Hermione could truthfully say that she would never wish this fate upon anyone. Because she did, even now as she was escorted out onto the pebbled shore with a rotted hand on her shoulder.

She wished it upon them all.

But not Theodore. Never Theodore. From him, all she wished was to be given whatever explanation he had previously withheld. She wished to know why he had opened an old journal filled with research on time-related magic and decided to pick up where the four Death Eaters who had written in it had left off.

What had he been trying to do? And what, for that matter, had the Dark Lord been, when he had assigned four of his followers to the task? Almost immediately, she recalled, after the Ministry's own collection of Time-Turners had been destroyed in the Battle of the Department of Mysteries.

A Dementor was floating in the air beside the docked boat, aboard which was Tavaris, sat sullen and silent on one of the benches.

The wind was blowing with vengeance, and when Burke stepped down onto the ice-washed deck, his grip on Regulus' letter slackened; the crumpled letter was picked up by the breeze

and carried further out to sea, fluttering through the starless sky.

Burke did not bother Summoning it. He only sighed and handed Tavaris his wand back before dragging himself to the other end of the boat to speak to the captain.

Hermione joined them stumbling, nudged off the dock. She swayed in time with the boat as she made her way to Tavaris' bench and fell forwards onto it, trembling with revelation.

The Dark Lord had ordered an investigation into time-related magic because there had been no Time-Turners left, and Hermione Granger had yet to go back.

The swaying of the boat worsened to an unsteady rock. She gripped the edge of the bench to keep herself from keeling over, struggling to breathe. She thought she may pass out.

Hastily, dizzily, she went over what she knew: the Dark Lord had ordered the creation of a Time-Turner; four different handwritings in the first journal meant four Death Eaters had done the research, one of them Rookwood, as Professor Saul Croaker had confirmed by matching it to old writings of Rookwood's from his time as an Unspeakable; years later, Lucius Malfoy had paid to have the device commissioned; in 2017, Theodore had begun its construction; his prototype, stolen from Hermione's office by Albus Severus Potter and Scorpius Malfoy and put into the hands of Delphini Riddle, had nearly restored the Dark Lord to power; the finished and far more powerful Time-Turner, found by Draco Malfoy, had been used to repair this; and when all was said and done, in exchange for turning a blind-eye to his family's involvement, Draco had turned that Time-Turner in for Hermione to destroy.

Except, she hadn't.

A hand was once again on her shoulder, but without tearing her unfocused gaze from the deck, she was unsure whether it belonged to the Dementor, meaning the boat remained docked, or to Tavaris, meaning the boat had begun to sail away.

So many more people had been involved than she had ever realised. Of them all, who had taken part with the knowledge of what consequences it would bestow on her? And had they believed Mione Nott missing, merely presumed dead? Or had they acted with the full intention of killing Hermione Granger?

There was no way of knowing, not when it had yet to happen.

It was strange to consider that the biggest problem in Hermione's life had once been that the other children refused to let her join in their game of King Square. She thought about that now, and about how, each time she had come home from primary school with just one pocket full of tears she had still to cry, her mother would remind her, "Hermione, my love, your mind is years ahead. You mustn't let them make it your fault that they're still catching up."

But not even this had happened yet.

Because Hermione Granger was not only aboard a boat in the middle of the North Sea, being shepherded back to the mainland with a husband who belonged at the prison from which the two of them had just set sail. She was also being tucked into bed by her mother in Brook

Green, London, with her belly full of roast and her mind stuck on the conundrum that was Elsie Hobson colouring in a picture of Jesus Christ with a purple crayon at Sunday school that morning.

Funny, how Time allowed things such as these: how one Hermione Granger could be wondering why anyone would ever be so silly as to think there was such a thing as purple people, whilst, in the very same moment, another Hermione Granger was wondering who might have had a hand in a death that she had yet to die.

A mind years ahead, indeed.

As the rocking of the boat gradually lessened, the voice of Helen Granger just as gradually quieted, until at last, the mainland was reached, and at last, Helen marked a page of *Paddington Marches On*, kissed her daughter's forehead, and switched off the light. From the doorway, she whispered into the dark, "Sweet dreams, my love," and in the very same moment, her daughter, all grown up, lifted her head to find herself at a dock unladen with ice, jolted into awareness by the hand on her shoulder as it moved to her arm to hoist her to her feet.

Hermione was barely conscious of stepping off the boat, merely of the tiny *thuds* on her left and of putting one foot in front of the other until she was walking on packed dirt rather than wood.

The journal entries had begun with one hand, she continued to think, because she was not as fortunate as her younger self to be dreaming of purple bears in white dresses with blue satin sashes, who were being told, most puzzlingly, that an apple a day kept the doctor away, but they mustn't ever pick apples off trees, especially trees belonging to snakes named Eden.

The other three hands had only started cropping up in the journal the following July, in 1997, directly after those who had been arrested for their participation in the Battle of the Department of Mysteries had been broken out of Azkaban. This included Rookwood, she thought, as sprawling roots began to impede her path, but whom else?

It was in a small, wooded area that Hermione was brought to a halt and pulled down to settle on a moss-covered log. Somewhere nearby, an owl was hooting, whilst, somewhere much further away, a purple bear arrived at Paddington Station with a suitcase full of stolen apples and a ticket to Timbuktu, on a mission to save a family of aristocratic cats.

"We will sit for a few minutes, before we go," Tavaris murmured quietly, without emotion. He was holding Hermione's gloved hand in his lap; she had not noticed him take it. "I fear if I were to Apparate us now, I'd Splinch us both."

Glow Bugs flitted about the clearing, producing bright flashes of white light that illuminated the circle of yew trees which enclosed it. Their needle-like leaves were strewn across the ground, littered, too, with their poisonous red berries.

To whom, Hermione wondered, would the Dark Lord have entrusted a pursuit so experimental, so requiring of his brightest minds, his faithful scholars and scientists?

Glancing sidelong at Tavaris next to her, she found that she already knew the answer, at least to this.

“Our souls on a platter,” Tavaris said. “This is your fault.”

“It is,” Hermione agreed hollowly. “But not mine alone.”

The last of those three hands had likely been Dolohov’s. As for the first hand — belonging to a Death Eater who had not served that year-long stint in Azkaban and would have therefore been available to write that first entry in July of 1996 — she had little idea. It could not have been Igor Karkaroff, for he had been dead by then, nor Severus Snape, for he would have too often been occupied at Hogwarts Castle. It could not have been Lucius, either, although he had gone to Theodore to have the task completed, therefore having known of it; Lucius, too, had been in Azkaban at the time of the first entry.

Besides, it would not have been the first time that he had used a journal he was meant keep hidden as the means to his own ends.

“The corsets,” Tavaris realised eventually, his mind evidently on a trail of its own. “You started wearing them just days before he died. I’d thought it unlike you, the vanity of it … the impracticality … but … you were binding the letter to your own body to keep it safe until you found the right hiding spot.” He made a light huffing noise, like he wanted to laugh but hadn’t the energy. “I commend you for your creativity, darling.”

Hermione’s jaw clenched slightly.

“As I do you for yours, Tavaris.”

After another few moments, he heaved himself up from the log, still holding on to her hand. He looked down at her, and his expression was a different sort of blank than its usual; it did not work to conceal his feelings, but rather, it showed just how thoroughly he had been drained of them. At some point, the effects of the Dementors would subside and he would recall his anger, but for now —

“Let us go home.”

She stood.

“Do avoid Splinching us,” she said, as he passed her his walking-stick to free up his other hand, with which he drew his wand.

“Oh, but, darling, you forget,” said Tavaris. “‘You don’t really *need* both legs, do you?’”

And with that fear firmly implanted, he spun on the spot, dragging the pair of them through yet another dreadful darkness. It was a relief to land, albeit unsteadily, before the wrought-iron gates — to see the Nott Estate under the glow of the waning gibbous moon, and to reassure herself that it was indeed Tavaris whom she had been holding on to, and not the last person with whom she had Apparated.

“So, then,” he said as they started up the gravel drive towards the house, “did you get an answer to our question?”

“He cut off his own finger,” she replied briefly.

Tavaris sighed.

“At least he’s dedicated,” he muttered.

The front doors were drawn open as they neared the top of the stone steps. Inside, Goppy was waiting from them.

“You may deliver that package to Daemon Burke now, Goppy,” Tavaris told him, as he and Hermione removed their cloaks and handed them over to be stowed away. “The same spot as last time.”

“Straight away, Master,” said Goppy, in his thin, croaky voice. “Will Master Tavaris and Mistress Mione be wanting their dinner now?”

Hermione was already halfway across the front hall, headed for the stairs, but Tavaris answered on behalf of them both.

“I believe we’ve quite lost our appetites.”

As she ascended to the first floor, she heard him turn right into the sitting room, in search of a drink. Drifting, she went onwards down the hall, past the door to her bedroom, and quietly, into the nursery.

Dinky was sitting on the grey carpet at the foot of the tiny bed, polishing a spoon from a case of silverware.

“Has he had his supper yet?” Hermione inquired, in a hushed voice. She lowered herself onto the soft, sunken cushion of the sage-green armchair, presently placed next to the bed.

“Master Theodore eats *all* of his potatoes, Mistress,” reported Dinky, with some pride. “And *three* Brussels sprouts!”

She nodded numbly.

“That is good,” she said. “One’s greens are very important.”

Theodore gazed up at her blankly from within his bundle of blankets, one of his arms wrapped securely around his stuffed Swedish Short-Snout, whilst the other was curled around Crookshanks.

“I’m sorry I was gone, my love,” Hermione told him, leaning forwards to brush his hair off his forehead, “but I’m back now. I’m going to sit here with you until you fall asleep, and when you wake up, we shall do whatever you want. How does that sound?”

He gave a slow blink. The light of the gas lamp on his bedside table was reflected in the bottomless blue depth of his eyes, so eerily like his father's.

"We can read *L'Oiseau et la Baleine*," she said, breathing shakily. "As many times as you'd like. We can even invite Draco over to play. I heard he's just gotten his first broomstick. Perhaps you might like to try a turn riding it. I believe if we work together, we may be able to convince him to share. Wouldn't that be nice?"

He blinked again.

Hermione felt her eyes fill with tears. She wiped them away quickly, sniffling, and settled closer with her elbows on the bed. She cupped the side of his face, smoothing her thumb over his brow.

"Why don't we read a story now? Would you like *L'Oiseau et la Baleine*, or shall we choose something different this time? Something from *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, perhaps? I could — I could even tell you a story, if you'd like. What do you think, my love?"

She waited for an answer, but there was none.

"All right," she said after a moment, as though in reply. She nodded, trying not to let her face crumple. "I'll tell you a story, then. One you've never heard before."

She took a minute to gather herself and centre her thoughts, and then, stroking his hair, she began.

"In a tall tower by the sea, there lived an old wizard who was very lonely. He had to himself just one room, with no windows he could look out and no doors he could open. Day after day, people walked past, and the wizard did not speak to them. Night after night, he was visited by a cloaked figure, and the wizard did not speak to it, either. Not since he had entered the room many years before had the wizard spoken, and the people often wondered why that was. Some believed that his voice had been lost at sea, when he journeyed across it to reach the tower. Others believed that it had been stolen by the cloaked figure, when it visited in the night. One of the people once asked the wizard himself what had happened to his voice, but, of course, the wizard did not answer.

"As time went silently by, items began to appear in the tall tower room. First, there came a bed, and the wizard slept more comfortably than he had in years. The second item was a desk, which came with a chair, and the wizard sat at it for days on end, waiting for it to gain purpose. Finally, there came a third item, and that item was a quill. On that day, the wizard released his first words since coming to the tower, and he released them onto parchment. When the people walked past, they attempted to catch those words, and when the cloaked figure returned, it attempted to steal them, but neither succeeded. Still, the people often wondered as to what those words were. Some believed them to form a letter. Others believed them to be the incantations of long-lost spells. One of the people once asked the wizard himself what the words were, but, of course, the words belonged to the wizard alone, and he did not deign to share them.

“Time went by as silently as it had before, until one day, an owl arrived for the wizard, and it carried with it the words of another. When he read them, the wizard still did not speak. Instead, he sat quietly at the desk, keeping those words company, and when the people walked past, they heard him weeping. Not one of them wondered as to why, for they knew to whom those words belonged, and they belonged to the wizard’s son. His eyes had not yet dried when he picked up the quill, and for the first time since coming to the tower, the wizard was to share his words. But it was too late: night had already fallen; the cloaked figure had returned, and it stole the words before they could be shared. A second owl arrived a month later, and the wizard wept once more as he read the words it had delivered, but, of course, he did not reply with his own.

“Another few years passed in silence. The people who walked past began to wonder, as they were wont to do, what would make the wizard finally share his words, if not the written ones of his son. Some believed that the wizard’s words were gone for good, swallowed whole by the cloaked figure that came in the night. Others believed that the wizard had forgotten all about his words, old as he was. One of the people almost asked the wizard himself once, but, of course, they knew that the wizard would not answer.

“One August, however, they did ask, only it was not the wizard whom they did; it was his son. The wizard’s son had no answer, though, and he told the people so as they led him into a tall tower room of his own. At nightfall, when the cloaked figure came, it ignored the wizard, and visited his son instead, for his son still had words to steal, and the wizard did not.”

Hermione took his hand, limp in her own.

“*You have words, Theodore*. No one has stolen them from you. *Please*, my love,” she implored, fervently and desperately. “Give those words a voice.”

Alas, Theodore stayed silent.

“Well, that was a rather depressing story.”

Hermione peered round the back of the armchair to look behind her; the old, voiceless wizard was standing in the doorway with his tumbler of firewhiskey, leaning against the wooden frame.

She swallowed thickly.

“It is, isn’t it?”

“Don’t tell me that’s how it ends,” said Tavaris.

“I don’t know how it ends,” she replied helplessly. “I haven’t finished it yet.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope Hermione's moments of realisation weren't too all over the place to follow; she has these moments in the books, where she just goes, "Oh!" and refuses to explain anything until she has it all sorted out, and that's what I'm trying to depict.

Also, regarding the information her brain spits out about Azkaban, the only non-canonical part is the Dementors coming back after Kingsley Shacklebolt removes them.

The yew trees — being not only one of the longest-lived species native to Europe but also highly toxic, they are a symbol of death and doom.

The bluebell flames — the incantation is unknown, so I made one up: in Latin, "flamma" means "flame," and "frigus" means "cold."

Between the Crosses

Chapter Summary

> Blood still stains when the sheets are washed
> Sex don't sleep when the lights are off
> Kids are still depressed when you dress them up
> And syrup is still syrup in a sippy cup
> He's still dead when you're done with the bottle
> — Sippy Cup, Melanie Martinez

Chapter Notes

> CW: Implied suicide of a minor character. Also, it's still November 1981.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two days had passed since she and Tavaris had returned from their visit to Azkaban Prison, yet its chill lingered deep within Hermione's bones, regardless of the copious amounts of hot chocolate she consumed in the effort to combat it.

The Dementors were only partially to blame; although they were responsible for fuelling the train of thoughts that had led her to this station, it was not their fault that she had stepped onto the platform, nor was it their fault that she was now stranded there, unable to read the departure board and unable to pass through the ticket barrier into the next world. The newly realised reality of how her circumstance had come to be was akin to the distant bonging of a grand clocktower, overpowering all else for the moment it sounded but unseeable, at the same time, for she could not open the station doors to reach the street.

Her mind, in a cruel twist of fate, was no longer a friend to her.

The still silence of the Nott Estate was of no help in this. Spared of its various dastardly visitors for the first time in years, it had grown as hollow as its residents. The lack of noise itself gave the illusion of echoing throughout the cavernous hall. Tavaris was little more than a shadow, lurking with his liquor well in hand, and Theodore —

Theodore made Hermione feel like a small child herself.

When she tucked him in at night without receiving an "I luh you" back, after her voice alone had sung the words to *My Favourite Things*, and when she woke the next morning to find him hiding beneath her bed, his gaze fixated on a single spot on the floor, what she craved

more than almost anything was her own mother, who might be able to tell her what to do. And if she could not, at least she could hold Hermione close and tell her the lie none but a mother could tell so well: *Everything is going to be alright.*

That was the problem, though. When this lie came best from a mother, who did that leave to tell the mother herself?

Late on Tuesday afternoon, word arrived that Morgan Travers had thrown herself out of a third-storey window.

According to Tavaris, who had heard it from Gaspar Avery (who had in turn heard it from Morgan's youngest son, Carden), she had left a note on the windowsill which had read only: *I know he had help.* And because Hermione, too, knew that Eamon Travers had not acted alone on the night of the McKinnon Massacre, she also knew what message Morgan had truly been conveying to her husband and youngest son: *I know what you did to my daughter and her son.*

The funeral would not be held for another week, but Hermione was dreading it. She knew whom she would see there, standing by the headstone and hanging on by scarcely a thread; Winifred Crouch had long been Morgan's closest friend, and neither of those women's circumstances were ones Hermione wished to ponder a second longer than she had already been made to.

To distract herself, she took on a new task, the results of which, she hoped, would make a difference.

By midday on Wednesday, of all the furniture that had once filled her bedroom, only the four-poster bed remained.

She stood at the foot of it for a minute or two, simply looking. This was the bed on which Theodore had been born, she recalled, but this recollection did not alter the fact that it was also the bed from which she had countless times awakened from a potion-induced sleep; it did not alter the fact that this was the bed on which she had signed the death warrant of Orvyn Shacklebolt, and under which, Theodore had spent until dawn one night hiding, after being told not to move, and not to make a sound.

This was the bed on which Theodore had been born, and this did not alter the fact that she wished never to lay eyes on it again.

Due to the advantage of being able to do magic with a snap of their fingers, Dinky beat her to removing the bedding, and they did so a lot more gently than she would have done, Banishing all at once the many pillows and blue silken pillowcases, the matching sheets, and the bluebell-patterned duvet. With another snap of their fingers, the bed, too, was gone, leaving in its wake only traces of its memory, etched into the hardwood floor, and revealing what had for years hidden behind it.

Thick, sagging, and shapeless, encapsuled by colour-occluding dust and clung to by an infestation of black, beetle-winged Doxies, some stirring and others long dead, and still, Hermione marvelled at the sight.

Crookshanks was pouncing in seconds, coating his fur in dust that flew up in big, grey plumes as he clawed wildly, trying to catch a Doxy between his teeth. Theodore scarcely reacted, no matter how new these creatures were to him. Dinky seemed to be experiencing great emotional upheaval, crying out in the same breath about Doxycide and his failure as a house-elf for needing it. But as several breathless moments came and went, Hermione only continued to marvel, standing wide-eyed and slack-jawed at the centre of the room.

Curtains.

She felt suspended in time as she approached them, uncaring of dust or Doxies, or of Crookshanks tangling himself at their base. She fisted the curtains in both hands, her heart quickening with anticipation, and yanked them apart.

The glorious grey of impending cold and rain streamed in through an arched window as tall and wide as the headboard of the four-poster that had long concealed it, swiftly flooding the bedroom; it filled every inch of empty space, every tired nook and every lonesome cranny, brightening even the rising dust and shocking the senses of the disturbed Doxies.

Hermione struggled to speak.

"How — how long has this been hidden?"

"*Oh, Mistress, a hundred years*!" Dinky wailed in distress. "*A hundred years for a hundred Doxies*!"

"I don't understand," she said, without turning from the window. "Why would anyone ever hide it?"

"The sun was being too much for Dinky's poor Mistress Beomia," they explained miserably. "Mistress Beomia be suffering such nasty headaches — the nastiest, Mistress Mione — *but not as nasty as the Doxies … Yes, yous*! I sprays all hundred of yous dead!" With a noise like a soap bubble poked by a child's reaching finger, Dinky disappeared, presumably off to fetch the Doxycide.

Hermione stared out the window, entranced, and she stared still long after the sun had gone down and the bedroom was once more lit solely by flickering flames. With her bare toes warmed by soft carpet, she stared and marvelled hours more, for even the light of the moon was breath-taking to behold from this spot. Hovering like an orb in the blackened sky, it glowed through the reflection of the bedroom behind her — a very different bedroom than the one it had been that morning.

Gone was the white wallpaper with its tiny blue flowers, replaced by blushing red with entwining vines of gold, and gone was the unforgiving hardwood, now a mocha carpet that had never been sprawled upon by flailing limbs. To the left of the window was a chestnut bookcase whose shelves had never been subjected to the Dark Lord's perusal, and to the right, a matching desk at which he had never sat, with a burgundy-cushioned chair he had never sent sliding closer. Further right in the next corner was a cheval mirror, next to a wardrobe from which he had never watched her select her clothes, and across from a singular

bedside table whose framed photographs he had never grazed with his cold, bloodless fingers as he had inquired, for the first time, about the loyalty of Regulus Black.

And in that same corner, facing the door to the hall and pushed up against the wall so one side alone could be accessed, was a big sleigh bed that sat firmly on the ground, offering no space beneath it, and that had been made up with an embroidered duvet of toffee-brown and peachy-red, gold-tasselled throw pillows, and cream-coloured sheets between which she had never been touched.

Theodore had long since been put to sleep, and here, Hermione had returned, to sit before the window on a crimson pouffe that — like the rest of the furniture — had been taken from one of the other Nott properties scattered throughout Britain, most of which she had learned about only the week before. According to Dinky, the pouffe had wound up in the sunroom of a cottage in Wales called Corban's Coast after Alphard Black of all people had, in a drunken wager, Summoned it from his own home in London — or rather, had pretended to (he had cheated by ordering a house-elf to do it).

Hermione longed to go to sleep herself. Only, she feared what sleep may bring, if she were to manage it in the first place. What dreams might be forced upon her when her waking thoughts were what they currently were? She had tried to prepare herself for sleep, at the very least. She had washed her face, brushed her teeth, combed her too-dark and too-straight hair, and then, when she had tried to change into her nightgown, she had caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror.

So, here she sat, thinking about the fact that Alastor Moody had likely caught a glimpse himself.

It was a scar unlike any other, for Antonin Dolohov's curse had not been designed to scar; the intention had not been to leave a mark so vivid, so unique, so devastatingly his own. It had meant the death of everyone else it had been cast on. It had meant — and would mean — the death of Remus Lupin. Had she not Silenced Dolohov when she had, it would have meant the death of her as well.

A scar unlike any other, for none but her would ever bear it.

Yet, Moody would catch himself another glimpse, when it showed up on sixteen-year-old Hermione Granger.

And Moody, suspicious of all things, would not dismiss it; Moody, suspicious of all things, would recall the blanks that had never been filled; Moody, suspicious of all things, would go to Professor Dumbledore; and Moody, the greatest soldier she had ever known, would be trusted with the truth. Perhaps Emmeline Vance would be, too, no matter how little detail Hermione had given describing the scar in her interview, for she would know precisely what blanks Moody was recalling.

Not only had the Dark Lord and Augustus Rookwood known Hermione's identity in the future, when even she had not, but so had Professor Dumbledore, Moody, and Vance. They had known, too, the fate of Mione Nott, and none of them had prevented it. Why would they have, these three people who had given their lives to her same cause? Why would they have

risked so much and so many for the sake of a single person? She would have done the very same, in their position; she had learned this about herself.

Whilst it was her duty to preserve the future, it had been theirs to preserve the past.

Despite knowing this, the pain was extraordinary, and Hermione stared at the moon until the candles burned low, trying fruitlessly not to feel it.

The hour was late, she suspected, when the door opened behind her. She did not bother to turn. She felt certain that anyone in this time who might wish to kill her had respect enough not to do it whilst her back was turned — an odd thing to take comfort in, but alas, she did.

"Ah, good, you're already awake," Tavaris said, and she knew at once that he was deep into his cups. "I have — oh, yes — well, now." He gave a big sniff. "You've quite some house spirit, darling."

There was a *tap* and then something clattered softly on the carpet. Through the reflection in the window, she saw him rap his knuckles on the footboard of the bed, mumbling a complaint about it being too rounded. She gathered that he had tried to lean his walking-stick up against it.

"I like the map you've put up there," he told her, pointing roughly in the direction of the desk. He swivelled, holding on to the footboard for balance, and chuckled again. "Now, really, it is one thing to cheer for a losing team but this … Darling, you don't even *like* Quidditch!"

Hermione took a deep breath, then forced herself up from the pouffe and away from the window to close the door to the conjoined bathroom, lest he woke Theodore. When she faced the bedroom, Tavaris was placing two tumblers and a half-empty decanter of sloshing amber liquid on the bedside table, sliding back the vase of yellow roses to make room.

Then he planted himself on the bed.

"So, I've been thinking, since you're so fond of letters —"

Her heart skipped a beat —

"Tavaris —"

"Do you not hear me already speaking?" he said sharply, and she quieted, watching him make himself comfortable among her new pillows. "As I said, I've been thinking, since you're so fond of letters — this is a fine choice of mattress, by the way — not too firm, I do hate it when they're too firm — but since you're so fond of them — the letters, that is — I thought you might read one with me."

"From whom?" she asked. "A letter from whom?"

He patted the mattress. "Come sit and I shall tell you."

"I'd prefer it if you told me now."

“Come sit with me, Mione,” he said, with a very different tone.

She bit down on the inside of her cheek, fighting the sting in her eyes, and made herself move. Reluctantly, she climbed over his socked-feet to reach the left side of the bed and sat as far away from him as she could. The distance did not prevent her from smelling the tobacco clinging to his clothes.

“A letter from whom?” she asked again, tightly.

“You needn’t be so terrified, darling,” Tavaris snickered, reaching into robes for a folded bit of parchment. He leaned in closely, and also clumsily, his propped elbow slipping off a pillow and leaving him low enough that he had to tilt his head up to look at her. With profound solemnness, he added, “I promise it isn’t from anyone in the Ladies’ Tea Society.”

He placed the letter in her lap and gave it a pat, as if ordering it to stay put.

Hermione sensed a headache on the horizon.

She picked up the letter and studied it warily; there was no seal nor envelope, so whatever had bound it had long since been removed, and the parchment was clearly a bit old, though she knew by now that the apparent age of a letter did not always speak to when it had been written. She and Tavaris had used older parchment in forging their correspondence, after all, to achieve authenticity. They had even used the same ink and quills that they would have at the time.

She unfolded the letter. No date was at the top, and no name was addressed, leaving its intended recipient a mystery.

Tavaris chose that moment to drop his head onto her shoulder; she stiffened, her mind going blank. The words before her appeared to be wiggling. She blinked hard to make them still again. With a deep breath, she forced herself to concentrate and began to read.

This is my fifth attempt at writing this letter. With any luck, there won’t be a sixth. It’s almost funny, you know. I have been wanting to speak to you for so long and now that I finally have the chance, I have no clue what to say or where to begin. Too much has happened, and at the same time, not nearly enough has. I don’t know if that makes any sense. But what I do know is that this is the last letter I will be writing you. I suppose that’s why there have been so many attempts. This last time, I need to get it right.

You have a son now. You are somebody’s mother and somebody’s wife. My brain keeps getting stuck on that. Did you want that son? Did you want to be that man’s wife? This is what we have all been asking ourselves. We argue about it all the time, and I hate that we do. A person should never have to question the loyalty and integrity of their friends. Despite believing this, however, these days I refer to you as a friend only in past tense. I wonder if that will make me seem less stupid to you, just as I wonder if I even seem stupid to begin with, for believing you ever were my friend at all.

We are constantly told that this sort of thing happens at times like these, friends turning their backs on friends. Still, I can't stop thinking that someone who supports him would not have played chess with my father or set the table with my mother, and they definitely would not have attended Mass at our church. If you chose to be where you are now, I don't believe you would have ever looked after me and Tuney as you did. You were even pleasant to the Whale-Wrestler, which, as Prongs has done well to prove, is a feat of epic proportion (see the nickname). It is this that I remind everyone of whenever your name is mentioned. The problem is that all I'm doing is repeating the same arguments and the only thing I have to show for it is that Padfoot can now finish my sentences (it's just as grating as you might imagine).

You know Moony asks the same question every time we see him? He's barely through the door and already he's asking, "Anything?" And every time we have to say no. So please give us a new answer, whatever it may be. I need to know if I'm wasting my breath, because I am running out of the words to defend you.

Someone wearing maroon will check in on you soon. If you are still a friend to us and you need help, mention Whizz Hard Books.

There was no signature, but Hermione had known who the letter was from before the end of the first sentence; Lily Potter had written her '*g*'s the same way her son would.

"Wh—Whizz Hard B—Books —"

"Indeed, the publishers of —"

"— *Hairy Snout, Human Heart*," Hermione finished, gasping wetly. Her shoulders were shaking. "That night — when Crouch and the Boneses were here — Moody, he — he picked up the copy —"

"Yes, that was so very thoughtful of him, don't you think?" said Tavaris. "Setting you up for it. Only then you proceeded to waffle on about a completely different book, published by a completely different company. It was as if you knew exactly what you were doing!"

She realised, after a moment, that her shoulders were only shaking because his were, with silent laughter.

"I never told you, but a few days after you received the letter, Lucretia Prewett invited us to a dinner party she and Ignatius were hosting — claimed it had been too long since we'd spoken, and she was interested in meeting you. I hadn't thought much of it until she oh-so-slyly suggested, 'And why not include the children?'"

"Such as Benedict and Aurelia Prewett's children?"

"Indeed. I declined." Tavaris sniggered and sniffed again. "We hadn't known Gideon and Fabian Prewett were involved with the Order until then, you know. But those boys wore maroon."

His head lifted, heaved upright. He turned away.

“How about something to dull the sting, hmm?” he suggested, sounding no less amused.

“I won’t drink that,” Hermione said at once.

“What would you like, then? Wine?”

“Tavaris, I have already brushed my teeth. No.”

“Just a drink,” he said dismissively. “Perhaps you’ll feel better.”

“I said, *no*.”

Tavaris scoffed. “For fuck’s sake, I was merely offering —”

“And as I *declined* your offer —”

One of the tumblers was swiped off the table, landing — but not shattering — on the carpet. Hermione shut her mouth.

“Will you ever let me finish a fucking sentence?” he snapped, twisting to glare at her. “Really, Mione, do you do that to everyone? Interrupt them whilst they’re in the middle of speaking? Are you truly so infatuated with the sound of your own fucking voice?”

She looked back at the footboard, clenching her teeth.

After a tense moment, he cursed under his breath. The dip of the mattress shifted as he rolled further away. She chanced a glance and saw him attempting, somewhat precariously, to retrieve the tumbler from off the floor.

Just then, it was not the letter that stung most, nor the missed opportunity for escape; it was the knowledge that she could have sat round the dinner table with Molly and Arthur Weasley again, perhaps even with Bill, Charlie, Percy, and Fred and George, as well as met the great-grandparents of Rose and Hugo.

If not for Tavaris, Hermione could have shared a meal with her family again, and with this thought in mind, she shoved him off the bed.

It should have been comical, the way his arms flailed in a hopeless attempt to catch himself. But it was not, because he seized her by the wrist and took her right along with him, bringing her somersaulting off the bed and rolling straight into the bookcase.

For several heart-racing seconds, she did not move, the breath knocked out of her. There was a twinge in her shoulder and a tingling throb in her elbow. Beside her, Tavaris was laughing again. Perhaps he had never stopped. When she turned her head, she found him back on the bed, pouring that drink.

“You know, it’s really quite ironic,” he chortled, as she dragged herself to her feet, “that you should read this letter only once you truly *can* only be called friends in the past tense. It’s —

well — we've *all* noticed the roses, darling."

And then he had the audacity to pluck one from the vase.

No thoughts passed through Hermione's head this time; all she knew was that one second, she was standing a metre away, and the next, she was charging at him, the blood thundering through her brain.

All Tavaris did was laugh a little louder, leaning back onto the mattress and holding the rose out of her reach.

"Give it here!" she shouted, grappling at his arm for it. The half-full tumbler slipped from the grasp of his other hand, spilling firewhiskey onto the duvet. "Those are *not* for you to touch!"

He practically howled, looking up at her incredulously.

"Hit a nerve, have I?" he asked, as she climbed back onto the bed. "I had no idea roses were such a —" her knee met his gut, "— *oomph* — sensitive subject for you — watch where you're fucking —"

"I swear to God, Tavaris, *give me the rose*!"

He stretched his arm over his head as he laid flat on his back, her knee now planted on his chest. He waved the rose mockingly, like it was a toy one might use to lure over a dog, just before saying, "Go fetch," and throwing it as far as they could.

"This isn't a bloody game!" Hermione said, livid, as she grabbed hold of his wrist. "Give it —!" She broke off with a shriek as he flipped them over, and then it felt even less like a game.

Still, he laughed, and he kept at it as he groaned and confessed, "I'm really getting too old for this."

"You're too old for a lot of things," she replied, through gritted teeth, straining to push him away from herself. "Namely, for acting like *such — a — child*! Get off!"

Suddenly, Tavaris stopped.

"What are you doing out of bed?"

She froze beneath him.

"It's late, Theodore. Go back to sleep."

To her horror, he began to crane his neck to look behind himself, rather than at the door that lead to the nursery. He then shifted off her, grimacing as he manoeuvred his legs, to look properly.

Hermione hastened to sit up.

“Theodore, my love, I’m so sorry,” she said, panting slightly. “We didn’t mean to wake you. Pa and I were just — playing.”

Only his head peeked out from behind the side of the bed; Theodore was glancing between the two of them warily, unsure. Just as she climbed off the bed, however, he made up his mind and placed his stuffed Short-Snout on the mattress, then turned to Tavaris and raised his arms to be given a lift.

Tavaris did not appear all that pleased about it, but he heaved him up onto the bed, nonetheless.

“Did you want to sleep here tonight?” Hermione asked. Theodore crawled under the blankets, which she supposed was as much an answer as she would get. “All right. That’s perfectly all right.”

She cleared the bed hurriedly, retrieving the tumbler and the sodden letter it had emptied itself onto.

“Tavaris, would you —?”

“I’m quite comfortable, actually.”

The urge to shove him again was strong, but Theodore was watching now. Suppressing it, she set the tumbler aside and brought the letter to the desk, where she laid it out so it might dry overnight, thus saving the ink from smudging to an illegible degree. Even if Lily’s words remained intact, however, Hermione knew that the letter would never stop reeking of firewhiskey.

She blew out what remained of the lit chamberstick on the desk. A second later, the lights of the chandelier went out, leaving only the gas lamp on the bedside table. The decanter and both tumblers appeared to have been Banished elsewhere by Tavaris — whilst her back was turned, so she would not see where he had stowed his wand. He was now struggling out of his robes to drape them over the footboard, as though he truly did intend to sleep there.

It was astounding, how quickly he managed to ruin things.

“Shift over a bit, please, my love,” she told Theodore, aiming for a light-hearted tone. “I’m going to go between you and Pa.”

Better she laid next to the wolf than him.

A couple of minutes later, even the Short-Snout had been tucked in. Theodore’s arms were wrapped tightly around it, one of Hermione’s wrapped around him as she stayed sitting upright in the middle of the bed. His eyes were fixed on something on the other side of the room; she followed his gaze to the window.

Tavaris did, too. “Checking out the moon, are you?”

He was leaning back against Hermione’s side, and she really wished he wasn’t. As he shifted to point, a little off-centre, at the moon, she winced and placed her hand on his head to keep it

from moving.

“That’s the waning gibbous,” he informed Theodore. “When the moon appears to form a perfect circle, we call it full. This is what comes after, when the full moon begins to wane — to shrink, that is. That is why it’s called *waning*. And *gibbous* means *hump-backed* — see how the portion that’s lit up resembles a hump?”

Theodore did not say anything, but he kept staring at the moon, so at least he was likely listening.

“The rest of the moon is still there, you know,” Hermione put in, speaking past the lump in her throat, “even now, when we cannot see it. In time, we will see it again, and it will glow so very brightly when we do.”

He dragged his eyes back to look up at her, a tiny furrow at his brow. He lifted one small hand to point at her neck.

She felt as though she had been slapped in the face.

“No,” she said hoarsely, shaking her head. “No, that’s just gone. I’m all better now; the Healer made me good as new.”

Theodore returned his hand to his Short-Snout. A second later, he lifted both hands to rub at his eyes, yawning widely.

Hermione brushed his hair off his forehead. “Go back to sleep now, my love. I’m here; it’s safe to close your eyes.”

For a few minutes more, he fought to stay awake. Eventually, however, he was lulled by the sound of Tavaris’ voice and slipped off to a story about a Latin author by the name of Hyginus who had written incorrectly on the myth of Procyon, the seventh brightest star in the sky and the brightest of all in the constellation of Canis Minor — which, as Tavaris took care to explain, was Latin for *the lesser dog*.

“He’s asleep now, Tavaris,” Hermione said, in a hushed voice. “You can stop.”

Tavaris ignored her.

“It was on the eleventh, you know. The last full moon.”

“Yes,” she replied shortly. “I know.”

“I keep track,” he told her.

“Good for you.”

After that, he was quiet, though not entirely, for he started clacking his teeth most annoyingly. Thankfully, when he next spoke, he sounded rather drowsy himself.

“Did you know, darling … did you know that you hug yourself when you sleep?”

Hermione rested her head against the hard chestnut of the headboard and tried to take calming breaths.

“You lay on your left side, on the right side of the bed, always the right side of the bed … and you hug yourself … as if … well, I imagine as if … as if someone is supposed to be there with you …”

Her eyes went to the poster on her right, hanging just a few feet above where Theodore slept. Emblazoned across it in big, orange lettering was, *CHUDLEY CANNONS*.

“It’s only when I’m here that you sleep on the left. Like you, I prefer the right.” Tavaris paused, clacking his teeth some more, then asked, “Was it the Muggle or the werewolf?”

“For heaven’s sake,” she muttered, scoffing furiously. “They are people; they have names.”

“Were,” he corrected; “they *were* people.”

Hermione had to bite down on the inside of her cheek for a minute to prevent herself from shouting at him — or slapping him. It did not matter which; neither would end well, not for her and certainly not for Theodore.

“It was the Muggle,” she admitted finally, and she nearly spat it. “He slept on the left. Will you drop this now?”

Tavaris hummed, nodding slightly. She stilled his head again.

“My mother slept in the middle,” he said, very quietly.

She frowned but did not speak. She doubted she had ever heard him talk about his mother before, not even when he had written about her death — that letter, he had slid across the study desk for Hermione to reply to without so much as meeting her gaze. It had served as a sign not to ask any questions, though Hermione had had questions aplenty.

Childbirth, it had been. Mother and spare both.

It made her wonder.

Tavaris had lapsed back into silence, slouched low against her. Hermione stayed very still and listened closely to his breathing, waiting for it to even out. When, after what felt like ages, it did, she continued to stay still, now for fear of waking him.

Soon, her muscles started to constrict, held too tightly in place; tension sizzled through them, screaming at her to stretch, to at least flex her feet or roll her neck. Not long later, one of her legs began cramping; she bit down hard on her lip and waited out the pain. Eventually, her eyes burned, begging to be closed; her vision blurred until the footboard became no more than a rectangular shape before her. All the while, she scarcely breathed, overly conscious of how Tavaris’ head lifted ever so slightly with each rise of her chest.

Hours passed, and Hermione did not move, not one inch.

The sun took its time rising. As she waited out the night, she could not help but wonder morbidly which of the two people sleeping on either side of her might have known what he was doing when he had lent a hand in sending her to this time — and possibly, to her death. The one on her left, perhaps, whose breath soured a bit more every time he exhaled, the scent of his liquor lingering on his tongue? Or perhaps the one on her right, who had bluebirds on his pyjamas and was drooling onto a stuffed dragon?

By the time the cold, grey light of day began to seep into the bedroom, she had closed her eyes only long enough to blink.

And she was so incredibly sick and tired of sitting still.

Very carefully, she removed her arm from around Theodore and, even more carefully, shifted Tavaris' head onto a pillow. Her muscles protested as she drew her legs up and out from under the blankets. Holding her breath, she climbed over Tavaris and off the bed, then made hurriedly for the wardrobe.

It was the automatic choice by now: her dressing gown. As she stood there wearing it, however, she felt strongly that it was not the right one. She did not want to go down to the conservatory for an early breakfast, taken in the silent company of Crookshanks and two ferns who ought to have been allowed to remain people. She did not want to sit about waiting for *The Daily Prophet* to be delivered just to see another photograph of Sirius laughing in the street or of the statue of the Potters that had mere days ago been unveiled at the St Jerome's cemetery in Godric's Hollow. And she did not want a Calming Draught — left accessible in her cupboard for this exact reason — for when it wore off, she would still be here, and the idea of breathing the stale air of this house a minute longer made her nauseous.

Hermione threw the dressing gown on the floor and reached back into the wardrobe; this time, she dressed herself properly, if not also hastily and a bit blindly. With a last look back at Tavaris and Theodore still sleeping soundly on opposite sides of the bed, she slipped out the door and into the darkened hall. Once she succeeded in reaching the sitting room, she called for Dinky, who appeared mid-yawn but was jolted awake by her proximity to the fireplace.

"Do not wake Tavaris and do not stop me," Hermione said immediately. "Ensure Goppy does not, either. Please," she added, because that had been a rude way to greet someone.

"Mistress …" Dinky started warily.

"I require Floo powder," she told them tightly, massaging her temple. "Please, get me some Floo powder."

"Where is Mistress Mione wanting to —?"

"I don't know, Dinky!" she snapped, and she shook her head slightly; it was pounding too much for her to think straight. "Diagon Alley? Hogsmeade? Just — someplace that is not here!"

She dropped her hand to clutch the mantlepiece for balance as she looked at them.

“I am allowed to leave, am I not? That’s what the Dark Lord said — he told me I could leave, is that — is that not still the case?”

Dinky put their hands on their hips, looking strained.

“With permission, Mistress,” they hedged, “but —”

“Fine!” exclaimed Hermione, hysterical. “I’ll go to Malfoy Manor, then! Now, *please*, for crying out loud, the Floo powder!”

It took no more than a few seconds. When they returned, Goppy was with them, wearing an expression of equal apprehension. She did not care to know what sort of expression Cantankerus had on and resolutely did not look at his portrait.

“I will be back later, all right?” she said, glancing between Dinky and Goppy, one foot already on the grate. “One of you will look after Theodore until I return, and you will tell him that I will be back later.” Without waiting for a response, she ducked into the fireplace, stated clearly, “Malfoy Manor,” and dropped her fistful of Floo powder onto the grate; in a whirl of cool, green flames, the sitting room vanished, and she spun away through the wretched, smoke-filled darkness.

Less than a minute later, she was stumbling out into the Malfoys’ drawing room and steadying herself on the nearest armchair, coughing into her elbow.

“And here I’d thought I’d ensured myself a better wake-up by coming here,” said an irritable voice, roughened by sleep.

Hermione raised her head, her eyes watering, and peered over the back of the armchair to find — funnily enough — not a Malfoy.

“Oh,” said Edmund Lestrange, looking up at her in surprise. He checked the time on his silver wristwatch, then squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again, as though to right his sleep-filled vision. “It’s not yet half-six. What in Merlin’s name are you doing here?”

She had meant to hunt down Abraxas and perhaps shout him awake, for to do this and later return, she needed to go about it properly. If there was anyone whose authority Tavaris might trust, Edmund was probably third on the list. But she supposed he would do.

“I’m going out,” she told him. “I’d like your permission.”

Edmund raised an eyebrow.

“*My* permission?” he drawled, bemused.

“That is what I said, is it not?”

“I don’t follow.”

“It’s really quite simple,” said Hermione, very matter-of-factly. “I’m going out, because if I do not, I am likely to cause someone bodily harm, and seeing as this someone will be Tavaris,

it shall go well for absolutely no one. Now, despite the fact that I am a *grown woman*, I require a permission slip. The Dark Lord is gone, Tavaris is asleep, I suspect Abraxas is also asleep, and you, for some reason, happen to be right here, awake."

"I see," said Edmund, at length.

"Brilliant. So — your permission, please and thank you."

He surveyed her for a long minute. She tried to stand still under his scrutiny, but there was an unfortunately high chance that she was twitching. Her left eye assuredly was, as she looked past him at the stretch of hardwood floor beneath the crystal chandelier. The skin of her left forearm prickled with the memory of a scar entirely distinct from the one that now marred it.

No one present in the drawing room that day had known the truth about her, she realised; not the three Malfoys, not Peter Pettigrew, not even Bellatrix Lestrange. If they had, there would not have been any talk about handing her off to Fenrir Greyback to do with as he pleased. In fact, Hermione suspected they would have gone about her capture in a vastly different manner.

She wondered what the Dark Lord had thought about it all.

"Very well."

She tore her eyes from the floor to look back at Edmund. It took a beat for her to recall the conversation, and then her mouth fell open.

"Very well?" she repeated, in disbelief.

"That is what I said, is it not?" Edmund mocked, with a flicker of a smirk. He heaved himself up from the armchair and stretched his back, like it had grown stiff. "It does not matter that any of us were acquitted; we have eyes on us still. Worse, a pair of them belong to — fuck, what was it the department's taken to calling him now? I heard it just yesterday from Martin Bones …"

Hermione swallowed thickly.

"Mad-Eye?" she prompted.

"That was it. *Mad-Eye Moody*." Chuckling, he retrieved his cloak from the seat of the armchair and slung it over his shoulder. "I don't believe I shall ever call him anything else from now on. But I digress. My point is that now is not the time to have you cracking — or tweaking out — or … whatever it is that has you looking like that. If it can be prevented by a little foray into the outside world … why the fuck not?"

She wondered if he had been drinking the night before, perhaps with Tavaris, and was still intoxicated now. It would explain why he had slept on an armchair in someone else's house, using his cloak for a blanket. She was proved correct when he threw his arm around her shoulders and began steering her out into the corridor; she could smell it on him — the burning, cinnamon-like spice of firewhiskey.

“Have you any clue where you’re going yet?”

“Er — Diagon Alley perhaps?” she said, concentrating on breathing through her mouth. “I haven’t decided.”

“I suppose you will need some pocket money, regardless of where you wind up. I believe I should have a few …” Edmund trailed off, digging into a pocket of his robes. He pulled out a wad of sterling banknotes, at which both Hermione and — by all appearances — he himself were given pause.

“Why on earth —?”

He hushed her before she could finish the sentence, his eyes darting to the portraits of pointy-faced Malfoys of the past. Without warning, he slipped the wad of banknotes into the front of her dress, sliding it smoothly under one brasserie strap.

“It’ll be our little secret,” he whispered, with a wink, decidedly still intoxicated, and he hastened them onwards in the direction of the front doors, a slight stagger to their combined gait.

No one intercepted them. The Malfoys remained asleep and Dobby and Lopsi had likely just started on breakfast. There was no reason for either of the latter to step in, not now that the Dark Lord was gone. Besides, she was with Edmund — what trouble could she possibly get up to whilst under his supervision?

Plenty, probably. But that trouble was of a whole other variety.

Despite the chill of approaching winter that left an icy sheen on the green, dew-covered grass, the albino peacocks were roaming leisurely about the grounds, pausing only to posture themselves at one another each time they crossed paths. Like Tavaris, all it took was the sight of them to make Edmund snicker.

“Incredible, isn’t?” he said amusedly, as he and Hermione headed down to the gates, “How someone can be so desperate for inclusion that he convinces himself he’s in on a joke, which, in reality, is a rather unflattering one about him. There never has been a more transparently vain creature, has there? *Peacocks*, that is.”

She was barely listening, more focused on the gates ahead. Although it was them who were approaching, it appeared to her that the gates themselves were shrinking the distance, gliding up the drive at a pace akin to a rush of incoming breath too forceful to fully inhale. Tall, vast, and glinting, they opened like a great iron bird spreading its wings for flight.

Edmund propelled them both past the property line and further still. When they came upon the road soon later, he halted and turned Hermione to face him; it felt like whirling.

“Now,” he said, pulling his cloak off his shoulder as she stood shivering, “let us see what I have here …” From these pockets, he succeeded in withdrawing two Galleons and a handful of Sickles. He looked at her shrewdly, then stowed the coins back where he had found them and draped the cloak over her; it swamped her whole form, her hands disappearing into the

sleeves. “Wouldn’t want you to catch a cold, now, would we?” he added, his dark eyes glittering with mirth.

Hermione stopped herself before sniffling to avoid what he would undoubtedly consider quality comedic timing. She inhaled deeply through her nose as recompense and promptly wrinkled it in disgust, catching a whiff of the tobacco that clung to the cloak. Distracted by the effort of not vomiting, she did not see him draw his wand. Not until he stepped onto the road did she notice it in his hand, and though her eyes widened and her heart stuttered, she doubted she was seeing correctly, because there was no conceivable way he would actually summon —

BANG!

She staggered in shock, her ears ringing. *Screeching* to a stop before them, vividly purple and positively towering over their heads, was the Knight Bus.

It could not be this easy. There was no other explanation; an ulterior motive was surely at play. The only question was whether that motive belonged to Edmund or to someone else, in light of whose contingency plan he was now acting accordingly.

“This is a test, isn’t it?” she asked, gaping up at the looming triple-decker bus as its doors opened to reveal the lanky conductor. “Or some sort of a trick?”

Chuckling under his breath, Edmund closed in behind her. Softly into her ear, he whispered, “A trick. Always assume a trick.”

But trick or not, Hermione refused turn back now. She doubted her feet would take her if she even tried.

“Welcome to the Knight Bus, emergency transport for the stranded witch or — er —” The conductor broke off, his face twisted into a squinty frown like he was surprised to find himself in daylight.

It was obvious, the moment he spotted the manor in the distance; he gave a small start, and when he then located Hermione and Edmund, he straightened like a soldier called to attention.

“Just stick out your wand hand, step on board, and we can take you anywhere you want to go. My name’s Perry Poffley, and I’ll be your conductor ton-ornin’ — this morning.” He cleared his throat awkwardly. “Destination?”

Instinctively, Hermione waited for Edmund to answer, like there was somewhere specific she was intended to go. Several seconds passed before she realised the choice was being left up to her.

“Oh — er — I’d like to go to Diagon Alley, please,” she said, feeling wrong-footed. Quickly, she reached into Edmund’s cloak and began counting out thirteen Sickles.

“It’s nine Sickles a ride, Madam.”

Right, she thought, clumsily adjusting her count. *No inflation yet.* She dropped a few of the silver coins on the ground in her haste and bent to pick them up.

"Ten if you fancy some o' our renowned hot chocolate," Perry Poffley went on with forced enthusiasm, "an' for just eleven Sickles, you can even get yourself toothpaste an' a toothbrush the colour o' your choosin'!"

She hesitated, but the sanitation (not to mention quality) of those toothbrushes was questionable at best; she handed over just the nine Sickles and tucked away the rest. Poffley offered her a hand and, after glancing at Edmund, who waved like he was seeing one of his sons off to school, she stepped up onto the bus. The doors closed.

"Have a seat, Madam," said Poffley, gesturing grandly to the rows of brass bedsteads. A witch who might have really been a hag was snoring in the nearest one. Hermione's eyes darted to all the others; once reassured that none of the bedsteads were occupied by someone who knew her, she walked down the aisle to the first available one. She very deliberately did not check the blanket for stains and sat down just in time to grab one of the brass posts before the bus reared back like a snake about to strike and took off with another *BANG* that hammered against her eardrums.

Through a parting of the curtains on the nearest window, she saw fields pass in a blur of green, flecked with the white of roaming sheep. Her heart raced in time with the bus. Her palms were sweating. When the doors opened at the next stop some fifteen minutes later, she half-expected someone wearing a bone-white mask to come on board and summon her off.

It smarted, how soundly the chemistry of her brain must have been altered in the past few years for her to now feel like a criminal in a getaway car. Was this what she looked like to everyone else? Did she have the appearance of an escapee? The cloak concealed her identity to a degree that she suspected she might.

Just another suspicious character on the Knight Bus.

She peered down at her feet; she did not remember putting on her dragonhide boots, but their addition reminded her of taking Polyjuice Potion to impersonate Bellatrix. The rest made her feel no better: silver stockings, which were twisted, and in which she had gone shoeless to a meeting about a prophecy; a maroon dress, Ron's least favourite colour, under which she had first hidden Regulus' letter to Sirius; and butter-yellow robes, which she had worn for her interview on Friday, because Tavaris had insisted upon the existence of an unconscious bias that meant the Hufflepuff House colours, heavily associated with honesty, would give the impression of trustworthiness.

Hermione remained sceptical. Vance had seemed suspicious of her from start to finish, even if Nina Dixon had not. It hardly helped matters that Hermione had been so painfully transparent at times. She could not decide which grated more: the suspicion or the pity. In those moments of transparency, she had glimpsed the latter in both their gazes. She had seen how they had both paled when she had recalled the memory of a chord tightening around her neck and her lungs, too, had remembered the feeling. She had seen the grim look they had exchanged when she had skipped over a word that refused to form in her head, let alone on her tongue.

She had not prepared for their line of questioning. She had not realised that Tavaris would be accused of more than just being a Death Eater — not until two witches had shown up to question her, rather than the wizard whose case it was. She knew the protocol; she knew what sort of victim was intentionally interviewed by fellow women. She also knew why — despite Tavaris being acquitted — she had been given a chatterbox at the conclusion of her interview. It was still in her pocket now, and she reached into her robes to take it out.

It was rather genius on Dixon's part, to use, for a thing like this, the same paper fortune-tellers that schoolgirls made to find out who they would one day marry, giggling and teasing one another from their desks at the results. What could be more innocuous to a man than a game crafted at the whimsy of young girls?

Each fold was blank, the chatterbox seemingly incomplete. Hermione knew better, though. Pinching the chatterbox between her fingers, she switched it once, twice, and she counted in her head until she reached the number eight. Then she began again.

One, two, three, four, five.

This time, she counted from one to twelve. Once she had, she paused, wondering if she should be doing this at all, especially since she did not need to. She had left it in her pocket for a reason. And yet, even whilst knowing what she would find, she began once more, and she went all the way up to sixteen. At the final switch, print appeared on the paper: words, numbers, and colours alike, making it complete.

8 – 5 – 12 – 16: the numerical code for *H – E – L – P*.

Now, one of the folds asked, *Are you safe? Yes or no.* Whilst, on the opposing corner, another asked, *Is your child safe? Yes or no.*

To say "no" to either one, switching it twice, once for each letter, would reveal the locations of the Office for Domestic Disputes and Disturbances and the Headquarters of the Magical Child Welfare Association. With the chatterbox in hand, Hermione and any child she had would be given shelter immediately, no questions asked. Additionally, if the names provided by the chatterbox should be Floo-called or written to, members of the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol would be sent to her location within the hour.

To say "yes" and switch it thrice, however, would return the chatterbox to its original blank state. For now, because those questions of safety were not nearly so simply answered, she switched it thrice.

A new question appeared.

Hermione stared at it, feeling suddenly as though she might topple over at the next heave of the bus to a new location.

Do you need a friend? Yes or no.

She had never known this part to be included; someone had added it to this chatterbox specifically, for her alone. She looked around to make certain that no one was watching, then

held her breath and, shakily, switched it thrice.

Not unlike a flower in bloom, the chatterbox unfolded itself in her hands, one flap at a time, until it was a big square of plain paper, at the centre of which, there was a name and an address.

Had Hermione been in what could accurately be described as her right mind, perhaps she would have stopped to debate it. As it was, her so-called right mind had jumped ship some time ago.

“Excuse me — Mr Poffley? I’d like to change my destination.”

*

Wanderers Street in Riverside, Cardiff, was lined with old buildings that appeared to rise three storeys at their tallest and that were mainly of stone or weathered stucco with wood framing that reminded Hermione uncomfortably of Mykew Gregorovitch’s wandshop. Many of them were shopfronts with windows that bore thick films of grime and signage that had lost most of its colour. The neon letters above the door of the nearest corner shop read only, *OEN*, for the *P* had burnt out. As she looked, the *N* flickered, as if it had little life left itself.

The bell of the door jingled. A white-haired man with a weary, sagging face and horn-rimmed glasses like the sort that Arthur and Percy Weasley both wore stepped out onto the pavement, his attention solely on the act of tearing off the plastic wrappings of a new pack of cigarettes. Pinned to one frayed lapel of his grey peacoat was a small plastic flower, whose petals were red and round and whose black centre was a perfect, even circle.

A poppy.

Hermione felt short of breath. She watched him cross the street without looking, stuffing the wrappings into his pocket and digging a silver lighter out from the same one, failing to notice the wrappings flying out into the rushing wind from his rummaging. A cigarette was between his lips before he reached the corner of the next block; it was lit by the time he stopped and offered up the pack to two other men who were stationed roughly two metres away from her and whose hair differed only in their level of greyness.

These men, too, had poppies pinned to their coats.

“Oh, now, good man, Scurvlock,” said one, who was tall with a thick beard and a great belly. He was an Irishman, by the sound of it. He took a cigarette for himself, and the pack was lowered to the man beside him.

This one’s face was clean-shaven, and his hair had the least amount of grey in it. He was bundled up in a worn, brown leather jacket and an orange scarf, with a patchwork quilt draped over his lap to keep him warm in his wheelchair.

“Camels?” he said, making a quizzical face.

“Best I could do, Skipper,” said the first man, Scurvlock. “Only Marlboros he has left are Light.”

The man called Skipper sighed, placed the cigarette between his lips, and tilted his head up in a silent request; Scurvlock leaned down to light the end for him, cupping one hand to shield the flame from the wind.

The air surrounding the group began to thicken and reek.

Hermione stared at the poppy on Skipper’s lapel, the noise of the scarce number of cars going past becoming muffled and the men’s conversation dimming to a series of disconnected murmurs.

Without warning, the plastic petals of the poppy were awash with an eerie, green glow.

She stumbled backwards as though shoved, tripping off the pavement and onto the street.

A car swerved to avoid her at the last second. The horn blared angrily, and the driver swore at her indistinctly from behind the window as he passed. Still, she did not move from the street, her heart beating wildly and her eyes darting all around. Even whilst squinting, she could spot no one who might have had a wand, and no ripple of a Disillusionment Charm, either.

She glanced back, expecting to find the targeted man slumped over with his friends closing in, panicked and shouting for help.

Yet the green glow was gone. Skipper remained perfectly upright in his wheelchair. He was looking directly at her.

A hand closed around her arm.

At once, Hermione recoiled.

But it was merely the white-haired man, Scurvlock. Despite his age, he had strength enough to pull her back onto the pavement whilst she squirmed and dug in her heels.

“Coc y gath!” Scurvlock exclaimed, his eyes wide.

The only part of this she understood was that it was Welsh. She resisted the urge to tear her arm away, sucking in large gulps of air. The hood of Edmund’s cloak had blown off, hair now flying into her face. She blinked hard, feeling unbalanced.

It was too cold for sundresses, she reassured herself, rather nonsensically. Too cold for the one that Tillie Bones had been wearing.

“Esgob annwyl. Pay some mind, love.”

For the first time, Hermione realised where the men were gathered; behind Skipper and the Irishman was the entrance to a pub, its name declared by a faded blue and gold sign overhead: *Jameson’s, est. 1947.* Embedded in a shallow alcove on the side nearest the street

corner was a second door, which had chipped remnants of red paint and a blemished brass address hanging above it: *110B*.

“What were you doing, lingering so near the street? You haven’t gotten yourself lost, have you? You certainly look it, if you don’t mind my frankness in saying so.”

“N—no,” she stammered. “Excuse me.”

Scurvlock let go. She made for the door.

“Oi!” the Irishman called. “You a friend of Lupin’s, then?”

Hermione glanced back.

“I — I am,” she said. It felt like a lie.

“Give us a shout when y’know he’s alive. Tell him he has Deirdre frettin’ over him.”

She nodded haltingly.

“He’s not gone away again, Jameson?” Skipper asked.

“He has not,” replied the Irishman. He gestured to the once-red door with his cigarette. “He stays up there just himself, no visitors, no nothin’, and he will not answer when Deirdre rings up. Only laid eyes on him twice myself — seems he emerges when he’s out of fags and booze. You wouldn’t happen to know anythin’ about that now, would you, love?” he added to Hermione.

She couldn’t quite find her voice. Suddenly, she was afraid of what she might find inside the flat. Her eyes fell on the intercom beside the door, her stomach twisting.

“Well, try it out,” Scurvlock encouraged. “Perhaps he’ll answer if it’s a friend whose voice he hears.”

Were it not for their prompting or their watchfulness as they waited for her to follow through, Hermione doubted whether she would have ever managed to press the button on the intercom.

“Remus?” she said. “Are you there?”

There was only static.

“Tell him who it is!” said Skipper.

She took a shaky breath. “Remus, it’s Mione. I’m sorry for not writing. I’ll explain what I can if you let me in.”

Still, no answer came, and Hermione realised that one wouldn’t, for what was there to trust about a voice? It could belong to anyone, no matter whose it sounded like.

“There was a question you used to ask me,” she said into the intercom, holding down on the button once more. “You asked it every month, just to see if my answer changed. The first time, we were in the common room, and I told you that we were drunk and that your breath smelled like lung cancer. The second time was in the boys’ lavatory five minutes later, after you’d brushed your teeth.”

Her exhale was half-sigh. She rubbed one of her burning eyes with her free hand and continued, tired and imploring.

“I remember watching you, and all I could think was that I hoped it was your own toothbrush you were using and not someone else’s because you picked it up at random and — oh, Remus — do you have any idea how unsanitary that is? Even if it *was* yours, to leave it laying out like that in a bathroom shared by an entire floor of boys, most of whom haven’t even heard of proper hygiene yet? Honestly — my answer likely would have stayed the same because of that alone.”

A long moment passed in which the static continued, then Hermione jumped at a *BANG* from above, followed by the rapid thundering of feet racing down the stairs.

In a second simultaneously too short and too long, the door was yanked open, and Remus appeared breathlessly before her.

He was wearing mismatched socks and a brown woollen jumper just big enough to hide the greater part of his pants, and his sandy hair now ran raggedly past his ears, a patchy scruff lining his jaw and creeping down his neck. He gripped the edge of the door with one hand, as though he needed something to cling to, and hid the other hand behind his back. Even as he stared at her in disbelief, she could think only one thing.

He had picked up his wand before coming to the door.

“Jameson, quick! Get Deirdre!” said Scurvlock. “He’s alive!”

“And he’s on his feet, too!” added Skipper, inciting a loud snort from one man and a boom of laughter from the other.

Hermione ignored them.

“I’m sorry. Remus, I’m so sorry,” she said tearfully, wringing her hands. “You needn’t let me in — you can slam the door in my face if you’d like, I’d surely deserve it — but I — oh, I …” She could not think of what more to say, not when her thoughts were all jumbled together, indecipherable even to herself.

Remus continued to stare at her with an expression that suggested he could not decide whether she was truly there or not. His lips were parted, but no words passed through them.

With shaking hands, she dug the chatterbox out of her pocket and held it out to him.

“Emmeline Vance gave this to me when I was interviewed,” she explained, low enough to hopefully not be overheard, as he unclenched his hand on the door to take it. “It’s common

procedure when dealing with — with victims of domestic abuse."

He looked up at her sharply, and she rushed on.

"That is not to say that I am one — it's if they have reasonable belief that some form of abuse has occurred, you see, so that the victim can take it home with them and tell the potential abuser it was merely something to fiddle with — to soothe their nerves whilst they were questioned — a girlhood game, if you will. They need only use the right numerical code and information on how to get help will appear."

Now, Remus did look past her at the men gathered outside, all of whom had fallen silent.

"It has your address on it."

"Right," Remus said at last, in an awful, cracking voice. He nodded, releasing an unsteady breath. "All right."

He stepped aside. Hermione sagged with relief. Bowing her head, she slipped past him into the narrow stairwell.

She turned to watch him go through the process of turning all three of the locks on the door, each one uniquely shaped and tarnished, and each one the source of a solid *click* that reverberated against her nerves. *This is Remus,* she reminded herself, but she had tensed back up, all the same. When he turned, she put herself right up against the wall so as not to block his path.

"After you," he murmured.

This is Remus, she told herself again, as she started up the stairs, the steps *creaking* beneath her, and once more, beneath Remus behind her. She slid her hands along the stucco walls for support. *Just Remus.*

The single door on the landing was hanging wide open, revealing a hallway no less narrow than the stairwell, with a slim side table strewn with unopened post, a disordered bookshelf that had keepsakes and other bits and bobs for bookends, and four brass hooks on the wall beside the intercom, only one of them occupied.

A picture frame lay face-down on the floor next to a pair of worn, brown boots, surrounded by shattered glass.

She hovered at the threshold until Remus waved her inside.

"You can hang your cloak there," he told her, pointing out the empty hooks with his wand. "I'll — er — put the kettle on."

He pulled the door shut and shuffled past her down the hallway, kicking the picture frame out of the way. He went no further, however, waiting until she had removed Edmund's cloak to follow him deeper into the flat.

The living area was cramped and miserable. Facing away from them was a sofa of an unidentifiable colour that looked as though it had been picked up off the side of the road and that had both a pair of trousers and a bath towel slung over the back; another broken picture frame was at the foot of a second, stubby-looking bookshelf, atop which sat a small television, a record-player, two dirty mugs, and an empty bottle of Jameson; and littering the coffee table was a third mug, a stack of plates with half-eaten food on them, several crumpled copies of *The Daily Prophet*, a pack of cigarettes, and an overflowing ashtray.

"It looks worse than it is," Remus attempted.

The desk in the right-hand corner had more picture frames on it, these ones unbroken, yet turned over, nonetheless, as though he could not bear to be watched by the people within them.

"Oh, Remus," Hermione breathed, her heart weighing heavily. She moved without thought, starting to collect the dishes; she had picked up the plates and a single mug before he was striding over to take them away.

"It's fine," he muttered dismissively, not looking at her, and he made for the next room. "The kitchen's through here."

The kitchen was roughly the size of her ensuite at the Nott Estate and in no better shape than the living area. The sink was attracting flies, already so full of dishes that, when he reached it, Remus had to put the other dishes on the counter instead, hastily brushing aside a few brown glass bottles to make room — *Draught Dominion Bitter Beer*, according to the oval paper labels on their fronts.

"Sit," he told her, putting both his wand and the chatterbox on the counter as well. He began rummaging through the oak cupboards above. "Shouldn't take more than a minute."

Hermione gave the table an apprehensive look. The contents of a second ashtray that rested next to a half-empty bottle of Ogden's Old Firewhiskey had spilled over onto another copy of the *Prophet*, which laid open to the obituaries. Black dress robes were draped over the nearest of the four chairs, folded with care.

A fervent indignance erupted in her chest. She swiped the firewhiskey off the table, stepped up to the sink, unstoppered the bottle, and poured it out onto the piles of soiled dishes.

She heard Remus sigh.

"It's fine. It's hardly as if I've developed a problem."

Hermione shook her head. "You cannot keep your Ogden's next to your funeral clothes," she said furiously, jerking the bottle to get out the last drops. "You cannot — you cannot put *firewhiskey* anywhere near anything to do with funerals at all!"

"Mione —"

“No.” She spun to face him, clutching the bottle by its neck. “If this had spilt, Remus — if this had spilt, it would have gotten all over the obituaries! It could have gotten onto your robes — *the robes you wore when you buried Lily and James* — and that cannot happen, Remus! That can never be allowed to happen!”

Remus stayed very still.

“It’s only firewhiskey, Mione,” he said quietly.

Hermione scoffed.

“Only firewhiskey!” she exclaimed shrilly.

“Isn’t it?”

In that moment, she wanted to shout at him and everyone else who had ever drunk or ever would drink firewhiskey. Especially Remus, though, because he would not stop Sirius from imbibing in it while he spent the better part of 1995 and the start of 1996 brooding about Number 12 Grimmauld Place, and he would not stop Bill Weasley from giving Harry his first taste in the aftermath of the Battle of the Seven Potters in 1997, and Harry Potter should have never been introduced to it; he should have never been given the option to like it, and to make it his drink, too.

Not when it had been savoured amidst the very first plotting of his death, the very day he had joined the living.

She would have hurled the empty bottle at the tiled floor had the memory of Tavaris smashing apart the contents of the drink cart not appeared at the forefront of her mind, and had she not then recalled the shards of crystal that Hatley Gibbon had later picked out of her hair when she had come to heal her throat and neck, among other things.

As though with the intention of summoning Hermione back to her senses, the kettle went off, the abrupt noise a high-pitched thing that tore through the staleness of the moment. Remus looked away to remove it from the stove.

Stiffly, she set the bottle on the counter and stepped back, because she did not wish to be the reason for more broken glass.

“Milk?” Remus asked, as she lowered herself onto the chair furthest from his black dress robes. “Ah, never mind. It’s gone bad. Sugar?”

“Just a spoonful, please,” she said, her face hot.

He paused, peering into a small ceramic jar, then scraped what was left of its contents into one mug, which he placed in front of her before taking the seat opposite.

“Sorry for the lack of milk. It’s Twinings, I hope that’s all right.”

“It’s fine.” Hermione held the mug with both hands and watched the thin spirals of heat rise off the surface. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

She sighed, lifting her gaze. Remus had his hands cupped around his own mug as he, too, watched the steam rise. She took advantage of the silent avoidance to study his face more closely.

The thin scar that stretched from his jawline to his cheekbone had become more pronounced, as though it had been reopened at some point, and now succeeded the faint line across the bridge of his long nose to slice into his right eyebrow. A new scar ran parallel to the first on the opposite cheekbone, unconnected but perfectly in line with another that grazed his chin. Beneath it all, he was sickly pale, and the exhaustion that rimmed his eyes reminded her of the same tiredness she had seen the December last, on his father’s face.

“None of this is fine, Remus.”

“No,” he agreed. “It isn’t.”

“How have you been holding up?”

“I’m still standing, aren’t I?” Remus muttered dryly. “I suppose that counts for something.”

“Remus, *of course*, it does,” said Hermione earnestly. “And staying on your feet — continuing to move forward no matter how hard each of those steps are to take — that’s all a person can do, really.”

“You seem exceptionally talented in that respect.”

She straightened, blinking away tears.

“I’ve had practice.”

“Right. I suppose that would explain why you no longer have that ring hanging from your neck.”

This stung a great deal more. What had become of that ring — that simple gold band set with the tiniest of diamonds that had taken Ron months to save up for — Hermione still had no idea.

“It — erm — didn’t feel right to keep wearing it, since I have this one now.” She held up her left hand.

Remus glanced at the ring in question: sterling silver, a large emerald encircled by diamonds, and by no means simple. She could see his heart in his throat as he swallowed.

“It’s nice.”

“But a bit Slytherin, right?” She tried to sound knowing, as if this were the reason for his lack of enthusiasm. “That’s certainly what I thought when I first saw it. But he was one, you know, so … I suppose it *is* fitting, is it not?”

“Very.”

His apathy dug deeper than any of the blatant hostility she had been confronted with at the Yule Gala had. Underhandedness, Hermione had learned to work with, considering her old career and whom she had been spending her time with these past few years, but apathy, especially when she knew Remus was anything but apathetic, was about as easy to respond to as Tavaris’ default blankness.

“Have you been sleeping all right?” she asked eventually.

“I’ve been sleeping.”

“I can see you’ve been eating, which is good. I know whenever I am upset or anxious, my stomach will not allow me to keep most things down.”

He hummed in acknowledgement.

Stalling, Hermione sipped her tea; her first swallow was loud enough to make her reluctant to keep drinking it. Her sniffle seemed too loud as well, but she was helpless to supress it.

“Those men outside,” she ventured tentatively, “one of them made a remark that suggests you’ve been drinking rather a lot.”

“Jameson, Scurvlock, and Skipper,” Remus informed her. “Their frame of reference is a bit skewed, to put it mildly. I doubt they meant for you to interpret that remark the way you have.”

“I don’t know. That was a whole three sentences, just now. Frankly, you sound a little as though you’re trying to convince me of something.”

“I’ve nothing to convince you of, Mione,” he said, looking up. “I rather think it’s the opposite. Or am I wrong about that, too?”

“I’m afraid I don’t quite know what you mean.”

He looked so terribly tired.

“You talk differently. Have you noticed?”

Hermione hadn’t, but now that he pointed it out, she knew it was true. She also knew why.

“One cannot help but absorb the language of the people most often around them.”

“I wonder what other language you’ve absorbed.”

“Remus —” She hesitated, that single sip of tea rising back up. She sniffled again. “Please don’t tell me you believe all that rubbish. I couldn’t bear it if you did.”

Remus searched her face, likely looking for a sign as to whether she was being honest or not.

“Tell me what I should believe, then,” he said finally.

“That I am still the same person you knew,” said Hermione immediately. “And that person would *never* do even *half* the things I’ve been accused of.”

He nodded slowly. “The problem is, I’ve recently learnt that you don’t always know a person as well as you might think you do.”

Something tightened in her chest.

“Oh, Remus …” she sighed, achingly sad, “I’m so sorry … I wish you would’ve never had to learn that.”

“You did warn me it would happen. I suppose I should’ve done a better job at listening.” It must have been obvious that she didn’t remember what he was referring to, because Remus proceeded to explain. “The day you received that offer, you told me more people would be drawn to You-Know-Who’s power than I would expect. People I thought I knew; people I trusted.” And as though it had only just occurred to him to wonder, he added thoughtfully, “You know, I don’t believe I’ve heard anything about Avery being brought in.”

Hermione felt the blood drain from her face.

“He will be now, though, surely. You must have mentioned him in your interview. After all, extending you an offer to join You-Know-Who’s ranks is a good indicator of his own presence among them.”

“I never said it was him. You only assumed.”

“But did you ever correct me?”

“Gaspar was already investigated,” she said, avoiding the question, “on account of his father having been revealed a Death Eater. They didn’t find anything on him.”

“Gaspar,” repeated Remus, his eyebrows lifting slightly. “Are you two friends now?”

“I wouldn’t go that far …”

“They caught Mulciber the other week. Do you also call him by his given name now?”

Hermione gripped the mug tighter. Compared to everything else that had happened, what Angus Mulciber had tried to do to her seemed insignificant. Even so, she did not have it within herself to defend it — to be the person who claimed boys would be boys and their actions were not anything to ruin their futures over — and as such, she could think of no safe reply.

Remus looked aghast.

“You do, don’t you?” he said. When she still did not answer, he shook his head and got to his feet. “Excuse me,” he added shortly, before seizing his wand and striding hurriedly from the kitchen.

Shit, she thought, and she let go of her tea to press the heels of her hands into her eyes, hunching over the table. *Shit, shit, shit.*

It took almost a minute for her to gather the strength to stand and go after him, weak-legged and faintly dizzy.

Remus was wrenching open the sole window in the living area, a lit cigarette hanging from his mouth. He leaned out of it, a cold gust of air barrelling into the space and causing Hermione to shiver. She hadn't known it possible for one to smoke aggressively, but there was nothing smooth about the way Remus currently was.

"Why are you here?"

Hermione wrapped her arms around herself.

"I wanted to see you. I had to be sure you were alright."

"Oh, don't waste your time worrying about me, I'll be alright," said Remus, taking on a tone that offered no comfort. "Although I am touched that you thought to check in. Three and a half years later, of course, but you know what they say: better late than never."

The wind did not carry his next release of bitter smoke away, but instead swept it back into his face. He took another drag.

"I'm sorry."

"Do you find yourself saying that frequently?"

"Remus, I had to leave. I had to stay away," Hermione said, in a thick, weepy voice. "I couldn't go outside and face it, not like the rest of you. I know that isn't very brave of me, but I just couldn't bear it — I couldn't bear to see more death."

He chuckled humourlessly.

"Yes, and I suppose you're going to tell me you didn't see any while living with Nott?"

She held herself more tightly.

"Do you want me to leave?" she asked, pained.

"No. For one minute, Mione, I want you to be honest with me," said Remus, sounding weary and frustrated, and rightfully so. "Because I know that you're lying, and you're more than smart enough to recognise that. If I told you even half the stories I've heard, you would realise just how very unconvincing this is."

He put out what remained of his cigarette and left it on the windowsill as he turned to face her.

"Marlene was informed that you *stabbed* a Death Eater once. Right in the middle of dinner. Apparently, you took a toe off another. A *toe*, Mione! Whoever it was, they seem to have

gotten off easy that day, seeing as the other two had to be Levitated to a Healer with possible *spinal* injuries! Don't you understand? These things cannot be written off as attempts to fight back because in neither of those instances did you face retribution! There aren't so many explanations for that!"

Remus had begun gesturing with one hand while he spoke, as if restless, or perhaps to add emphasis. Hermione tracked the movements of his wand, wondering if he might get angry enough to use it on her. She didn't think she would try to stop him if he did.

"Christ, Mione! You were seen leaving an event on *You-Know-Who's arm*!" he went on, very nearly yelling. His voice was strained, seemingly from the effort it took not to. "Just last year, I was offered immunity at his request, do you know why? It was to be a gift for your birthday. *My life*! A gift to you! I beg you to consider that for a second. *Truly* consider it. Because there are only two possibilities and one of them must be true. Either you married Nott by choice and were therefore a willing participant or at the very least in support of You-Know-Who's objective, or you did not! It's one or the other, Mione, so take your pick and allow me to stop guessing because I cannot keep doing this! *I can't*!"

Hermione's first thought was that she really should leave; her second, an especially guilt-inducing one, was that she should not have come at all. It was undeniable, palpable even, the pain that her mere presence was causing him, and more pain was the very last thing Remus needed, let alone deserved.

But then she considered what he did deserve.

"I have a son."

"I am very aware of that," said Remus coolly.

"His name is Theodore," she forced herself to go on. "He is two years and two weeks old. He has the same eyes as his father and the same nose as my father. He sleeps with a stuffed Swedish Short-Snout every night and his favourite book is in French, though I suspect he doesn't understand any of it. His first words were, 'my love,' because that is what I call him, and what I call him is what he hears the most. He is curious, and friendly, and intuitive, and incredibly empathetic. And he has not spoken in nineteen days."

Remus frowned; nineteen days ago, it had been Hallowe'en.

"He saw something no child ever should, much like another child you know. Although he will not remember it a year from now, it will remain in his subconscious perhaps for the rest of his life. If I could take that memory away from him today, I would. If I could take him away from the place it happened, I would. And if I could honestly promise him that nothing like it would happen again, I would do that, too. I would do *anything* for him. If I could. That is what I mean when I say that I have a son."

In the quiet that followed, Remus stared hard at the windowsill, a faint line lingering at his brow. One would not have expected the air in the room to be so frigid if they looked at him, but Hermione's teeth were on the verge of chattering.

His words, when they came, dripped from his mouth like molasses. "*If* you could … *If* … because, for whatever reason, you *can't* … Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

She could not answer, not directly.

"I presume you recall the Children Against Lycanthropy Act that came into effect a few months ago?"

He looked away from the windowsill to nod at her, which she suspected was an understatement in and of itself.

"Dolores Umbridge drafted the Bill at Tavaris' request."

No explanation was necessary, for Remus was smart enough to put the pieces together himself; the Bill to prevent children from living under the same roof as a werewolf had been made specifically for him, by someone who had both the power and will to do that and more. In the span of a single second, his face had fallen, his shoulders had dropped, and he looked as though all the fight had gone out of him.

"If I were to turn out all your pockets, would I find a wand?"

Hermione did not directly answer this time, either; she merely turned out her pockets. She then retrieved Edmund's cloak from the entryway and turned out those pockets, too. She dropped the money — wizarding and Muggle alike — on the coffee table and shook the cloak for good measure; the tiniest of silver spoons fell out.

"I don't own any garter belts anymore," she said.

"Whose cloak is that?"

"Edmund Lestrange's."

Remus pressed his lips together, then tilted his head back to blink at the ceiling.

"All right," he said gruffly, after a long minute. He met her gaze, and his eyes were wet, too, now. "I have one last question, and so help me, Mione, I need you to answer it honestly."

Hermione wiped her face hastily on her sleeve, sniffling again. She could scarcely breathe through her nose anymore.

"OK."

"Did you know about —?" Remus broke off, glancing at the broken picture frame at the foot of the bookshelf. She did not have to turn it over to know that the photograph it housed was of Sirius.

"No one told me it was him," she settled on.

Remus nodded his head, then shuffled over to drop heavily onto the sofa. After a moment, he leaned forward to plant his elbows on his knees and bury his face in hands. His shoulders

soon began to shake.

Hermione considered herself woefully naive for thinking she could leave so easily.

She dropped the cloak on the floor, because Remus didn't deserve to have his things touched by it, and approached tentatively, cautious. She placed a hand on his shoulder, giving him the chance to brush her off; when he did not, she sat down, despite the dubious cleanliness of the sofa. Muffled though they were, she could still make out his sobs. She moved closer and wrapped her arms around him properly, laying her head on his back, his spine hard against her cheekbone. The wool of his jumper rapidly became damp.

"I'm s—so sorry, Remus."

She felt him shake his head.

"Stop apologising."

"*But I don't know how to make it better*," she wept.

One of Remus' hands joined her own. He gripped it firmly; Hermione squeezed back.

"I'm sorry I don't know, either," he choked. "Mione — I can't imagine — except I can. I haven't been able to stop."

She clung harder.

"Even —" Remus fell silent, seemingly to catch his breath. He shifted slightly, and when he continued, his voice was no longer muffled. "Even when I reported it, I wasn't certain. Part of me hoped we had gotten it wrong, because at least then … but no … we were right all along … about all of it." He shifted again, craning his neck to look at her. His eyes were bloodshot. "Weren't we?"

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut. A moment passed, then another, and then she nodded her head.

She heard him swallow. His heart was beating very fast.

And then he let go of her hand.

"I'm sorry," he gasped, standing up, and he ran clumsily out of the room, disappearing into the kitchen.

Hermione's mouth fell open with a small rasp of a noise, as though she had been punched in the stomach. She twisted on the sofa to gape at the doorway, mortified.

A few seconds later, a door was thrown open, and the sound of his retching reached her ears. Her mortification only grew. Finally, the truth, and he was sickened by it.

Her skin, even beneath her clothes, felt as if it were coated in the same thick grime as the windows out on the street. Once again, she reminded herself: *This is Remus*. If he was

sickened, it was not because of her; it was because of what had been done to her. If he was sickened, it was because of Tavaris.

She was too frightened to look at her hands, worried, for a reason she could not explain, that she would find dried blood underneath her fingernails.

There was a muttered curse and a sudden *clattering* within the kitchen, like several things had been knocked over all at once. Hermione flinched and hastened to face forward, where she stared blindly but determinedly at the black screen of the television.

Shortly thereafter, the footfalls came. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Remus come to a halt beside the sofa.

"I'm sorry," he said again, roughly.

"Stop apologising," she replied.

"Are you alright?"

The question had a foreign ring to it. Hermione could not recall the last person who had asked her if she was alright. She thought it might have been him.

"I'm fine," she said, because she did not wish to think, let alone speak, about all the ways in which she was not.

Remus sat back down very slowly. His hand rose and hovered.

"Can I … Is it all right if I touch you?"

His hesitancy made her want to hide her face.

"Oh, my God," she scoffed. She could not look at him. "Honestly, Remus, don't be ridiculous. It's not as if I'll fall apart if someone pats me on the bloody back."

He hesitated still, then put his hand on her shoulder.

Hermione's heart slammed into her chest. She tried to stay still, but to do so proved far more challenging when she knew no harm would come to her if she moved. She lasted less than ten seconds.

"Sorry!" she burst out, shooting to her feet. The blood rushed to her head. "That's — no —" she twitched and rolled her shoulders back, "— just — no."

When she turned round, Remus had one elbow propped up on the arm of the sofa and was covering his mouth with his hand. He looked horrified.

"I'm sorry," she repeated, slightly winded. She perched next to him on the edge of the sofa, her face once again overly warm. "I didn't mean to alarm you."

He didn't say anything.

Hermione took his other hand in both her own, partly to prove herself, but also partly to verify that his hand was not one of rotted flesh, nor so pale that it appeared bloodless, and that his pinkie-finger bore no white-gold signet ring. Carefully, she admitted, "I don't like hands on my shoulder."

A moment passed. Remus turned his hand over to hold hers back. After another moment, he lowered his other hand from his mouth to ask softly, "What can I do?"

"Nothing," she said honestly.

"I can do nothing."

"It's harder than you would expect."

"I don't know about that," said Remus, sounding bitter. "As it turns out, doing nothing is entirely within my capabilities. If it's nothing you want, then nothing is what I'll do."

"Even when I go back?"

His hand tightened briefly. "Must you?"

"I have a son, Remus."

"There's something that stops him from leaving, isn't there?"

"They knew I'd stay for him," was all she said.

"They?" Remus inquired. "That's Nott and who else?"

"You oughtn't ask questions you already know the answers to."

He inhaled deeply.

"Before you say anything, you ought to also know that Theodore is a Nott by blood." Hermione looked up at him. "It's important to me that you know that."

Tensely, he inclined his head. "I know that, then."

His eyes remained swollen, and his face was sicklier than it had been a half-hour ago, because of her.

Because of Tavaris.

"Will you come again?" Remus asked.

Hermione's eyes widened slightly.

"Would you like me to?"

"Very much."

“Oh,” she said. “Then yes. I will.”

He rested his head, the tension seeping out of him.

“Good,” he sighed.

The room was positively freezing now; Hermione could not puzzle out why she was still sniffling whilst Remus did not seem to notice a chill at all. She sought his heat, shifting closer, but the only warm thing about him was his jumper.

With clear warning, he put his hand to her forehead.

“I’m burning up, aren’t I?”

“It does feel like it, I’m afraid,” he said. He moved his hand, paused, then began rubbing her back. He must have felt her spine, like she had felt his, because, casually, he added, “Are you hungry at all?”

She mostly felt queasy, but she said, “I suppose I could eat.”

“I’ll get us some food, then.”

Remus pushed off the arm of the sofa to get to his feet. He grabbed his trousers off the back and put them on hastily, teetering a little to one side before he had both his feet through.

“You’ll — er — still be here when I get back, won’t you?”

“If you want me to be,” said Hermione.

“I do.”

“Then I’ll still be here.”

He nodded to himself and headed down the hallway to put on his boots, staggering a little as he did so, and to fish keys and a wallet out of the coat hanging by the door. With one hand on the doorknob, he threw her a backwards glance, nodded to himself again, and left.

Hermione stared at the window for a while, then laid back down, her head simultaneously throbbing and full of cotton. After a minute, she removed her boots to pull her feet up and curled on her side, her eyelids drooping.

In perhaps seconds, she was fast asleep.

It was a deep sleep, too; the sort of sleep that was utterly dreamless, and from which one woke bleary-eyed and struggling to remember when and where they were. It took several long moments for the knowledge to return to her, as she blinked and rubbed her eyes, because the room appeared vastly different.

Even the air seemed cleaner. On the coffee table was now only an emptied ashtray, Edmund’s suspiciously small spoon and his spare change all in a neat stack, and a tall glass of water,

which even had a coaster. The picture frames, both broken and unbroken, were gone, likely tucked away. At least she hoped they all were, rather than the two broken ones now laying at the bottom of a bin, with Sirius' laughing face hidden beneath the rubbish.

All the lights had been turned off, leaving the room dark apart from the dim rays of sun that trickled in from the window, now closed. Hermione was warm to the point of being overheated. She realised, shifting to sit up, that a thick white comforter had been draped over her whilst she had slept.

"Remus?" she called out.

He appeared out of a door on the left, wearing an entirely new jumper and pair of trousers, plus socks that matched. He had also shaved, and his hair was damp, as if he had showered; it made him look a little more alive, just a touch more colour in his cheeks.

"I'm here," he said.

"How long have I been asleep?"

Remus checked his wristwatch, which had a brown leather strap and a gold face. "It's just past three, so probably about five hours. I didn't want to wake you."

"I see you've been highly productive in those five hours," said Hermione, casting the room a long, pointed glance. The look she gave him was equally pointed. "You look better."

"I — thank you," he said uncomfortably. He stuffed his hands in his pockets only to immediately take them out. "Oh, yes, your food — I made sure to keep it warm. The water on the coffee table is yours, by the way," he added over his shoulder, as he entered the kitchen.

She felt warm for an entirely different reason now.

When Remus returned, he placed a plate of fish and chips in front of her on the table. His knees made a *cracking* noise as he re-joined her on the sofa.

"Is this from the pub downstairs?" Hermione asked, and he nodded. "Thank you, Remus. Really, you needn't have done all this. I'll reimburse you for —"

"With whose money would you reimburse me, Mione?" asked Remus, before she could finish. His face was set grimly. "Edmund Lestrange's? Just eat. Perhaps you'll feel better."

He handed her cutlery: a fork and knife.

She eyed them for a moment, adjusting to their strangeness, before sitting up properly to reach the food. Remus, meanwhile, leaned back to make himself more comfortable, extending his legs under the table and crossing them at the ankles. He clasped his hands calmly, patiently, and emptily, in his lap.

Hermione suddenly realised that she was starving. When she put down the fork and knife, the plate was clean.

Chapter End Notes

I was going to do a cliff-hanger but elected to not be a total monster, hence the length of this.

I wrote the second half of this on Remembrance Day, so… the title for this chapter comes from the poem ‘In Flanders Fields’ by Canadian poet and physician Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae, written following WWI.

In Flanders Fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,
In Flanders Fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders Fields.

Jig and Saw

Chapter Summary

> You see, all the wisest women
> Had to do it this way
> ‘Cause we were born to be the pawn
> In every lover’s game
> — Mastermind, Taylor Swift

Chapter Notes

> CW: potential quarantine-related PTSD, implied/referenced drug use and overdose, and another … erm … Minor Character Death.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Suspicion did not equate to knowledge, no matter how strong this specific suspicion was and no matter how much evidence there was to support it. To carry on suspecting but not knowing what awaited — to avoid a return that would eventually be made unavoidable — had instilled a sense of unease that, it seemed, would lessen only once certainty was achieved.

Nevertheless, it had been a stupid idea to go home.

Sunlight did not flood the conservatory; beyond its tall windows, the greyness of the sky did not budge, nor did the yellowness of the grass. Consequently, the white marble tiles gleamed just dimly, the leaves and petals of even the most colourful of the plants were muted and unremarkable, and the old fern’s pot now appeared made of charcoal rather than indigo-painted terracotta.

At the table, adorned with its white cloth and lace doily, a chamberstick burned with the sole warm-toned light in all the room. Next to it, a cup of tea grew cold, a three-tiered tray of pastries and finger-sandwiches went uneaten, and a letter lay, waiting impatiently for a reply.

Dear Wearer of Ugly Socks,

I thought things could not be nearly so tense here as they are at Hogwarts. Can you believe that I thought wrong?

Uncle Gaspar came to speak to my grandfather last night and everyone has been acting oddly ever since. My father asked how you, Draco, Vincent, and Gregory have been taking Potter's interview about the Triwizard Tournament, and I told him what you told me about having seen no proof of anything. He instructed me to begin "distancing" myself regardless. As if Rita Skeeter would have written accurately about anything to do with Harry Potter. As if it was not published by The Quibbler! Then my grandfather said to only be distant in public and spent all of dessert waffling on about how I ought to be nicer to the four of you. Just what is he on about? I AM nice!

Meanwhile, my mother keeps shooing us to the nursery. Both of us! I am sixteen years old! What does she expect me to do? Be a good little girl and go play with my dolls? Tori says she wishes the Weasley twins would set those fireworks of theirs off here too, just to break up the tension. But if those fireworks failed in removing the twig from the behind of that toady spinster who clearly had no friends as a child, I highly doubt they would remove the one currently lodged up my mother's.

May Tori and I come for a swim tomorrow? And do not pretend to be busy. I know you have nothing better to do.

Much love,

Daphne

Sighing, Theo slumped forward, propped his elbows up on the table, and rubbed his face tiredly.

Forget that longing for certainty; he should have stayed at school, waited a couple months longer until the summer holidays, before finding out just who was in his house. If he had, he would not be struggling to think up a lie right now with all the brainpower of someone who had slept just four hours in the last twenty-seven.

How could he tell Daphne that her uncle had been at Nottingham Hall, too, last night? Laughing loudly in the lounge as he caught up with his old friend, Angus Mulciber, who was presently meant to be in a cell in the middle of the North Sea.

The doors to the natatorium opened behind Theo. He dropped his hands and glanced over his shoulder.

Two wizards moseyed into the conservatory, clearly having come in from the unlively gardens, for they were windswept and wearing long, mud-ridden cloaks. Both were pale and gaunt with the same overgrown dark hair and darker eyes. It was the shorter, stockier one of the two who noticed Theo first; he trailed off mid-sentence and his dry lips cracked into a disbelieving smile.

"Is that *you*, Theodore?"

He and his brother slowed as they neared.

“No one mentioned you would be coming home for Easter,” the latter said, smiling as well. He ruffled Theo’s hair with unnerving familiarity. “Look at you, all grown up. I’d wager you could even pronounce our names now.”

The other wizard sat down at the table.

“‘Stan!’” he said excitedly, in a small, child-like cry. “‘Stan, see! Batty make sho-so fly!’” He snickered and plucked a macaroon from the tray.

Theo had no idea who “Batty” was, but the mention of his stuffed Swedish Short-Snout — Sho-So, thanks to unpractised enunciation — disturbed him slightly. He knew he ought to say something but couldn’t think what. He leaned back so it would not seem like he was hiding Daphne’s letter and watched Rabastan Lestrange savour a lemon macaroon, letting out a loud, lengthy groan of pleasure between each nibble.

Rodolphus Lestrange pulled up a chair and inspected the tray; unlike his brother, he took the savoury route and selected a beef wellington sandwich.

“I was the only one for whom you managed the letter ‘R’,” he said smugly.

“Something along the lines of … *Rod-fuss*, was it?”

“A fair sight better than what he called Avery and Snape.”

Rabastan snickered again as he stole another macaroon.

“Snape?” Theo inquired, in a carefully even voice.

“‘Sap,’” Rabastan told him, and Rodolphus’ lip curled.

“You didn’t miss the mark with that one.” He finished the sandwich with a second bite and sighed to himself in a pleased fashion, then noticed the letter. Idly, he picked it up. “What’s this, then?”

“Just a letter from a friend,” said Theo, hoping he didn’t sound as uncomfortable as he felt. Only in photographs could he recall ever seeing these two wizards — and, ironically, printed alongside most of them had been, *HAVE YOU SEEN THIS WIZARD?*

Could a minor be charged with harbouring a fugitive? He would have to look into it, just in case.

Rodolphus’ laugh seemed to claw its way up his throat, tearing his vocal chords in the process.

“Rabastan, look, he truly has grown up,” he grinned, showing Daphne’s letter to his brother. “He has a *girl* writing to him!”

Rabastan scoffed in surprised amusement. “One of Avery’s nieces. He’ll be chuffed about that.”

“I regret to inform you, though, Theodore, she does not sound terribly interested.” Before Theo could finish debating the merits of repeating the word *friend*, Rodolphus assured him, “She’ll come round eventually, if she knows what’s good for her.”

Theo did not like the way he smirked as he said this.

Rodolphus returned the letter to the table.

“For now, tell her the pool has been drained for cleaning,” he instructed, “and offer to visit Greenton instead. You can say you wish to be rid of your father for a while — which would hardly be a lie, would it?” he added, in a hushed voice, chuckling. There was an uncomfortably knowing glint in his eyes.

Abruptly, Rabastan choked on his third macaroon.

“Still kicking, that one?” he managed to get out after a second, pointing incredulously at the potted fern.

“Well, it does get watered,” said Theo dryly.

“Just this one?” said Rabastan, his face all lit up.

“It is scarcely surprising,” drawled Rodolphus, twisting to peer at the fern, “the other did have a shorter life expectancy.”

Theo folded up Daphne’s letter and tucked it into his pocket, then leaned back again and crossed his arms, trying to appear casual.

“Are you two staying here, then?” he asked.

“Here and there,” said Rodolphus, quite unhelpfully.

Rabastan had risen to inspect the fern more closely. It seemed to cheer him, the sight no less a luxury than the macaroons. He flicked one long leafy stem and watched it shiver back into place.

“I’m just opposite Mulciber,” he muttered, “in the shell room.”

Rodolphus turned sideways on the chair to stare at him.

“You are not.”

“I am.”

“Rabastan,” he said, sounding strangely unsettled, “is that where you’ve been staying since February? *That* room?”

“I don’t want anyone else sleeping there,” said Rabastan.

*

Suspicion did not equate to knowledge, no matter how strong this specific suspicion was and no matter how much evidence from the past there was to support it. Hermione had suspected the consequences of her leaving would lead to one more memory that she would have to shut out, because the consequences she faced almost always did, certainly those consequences which were faced here, now.

It was with great reluctance that she boarded the Knight Bus once more — a reluctance which was shared by Remus, who watched her board after summoning the bus with his wand, and at her request, whilst under the cover of a Disillusionment Charm.

Nevertheless, it was a good thing she came back when she did.

"*Fish and chips*?" Tavaris observed with a rather pretentious degree of disgust. "No wonder it's coming back up. If there is one thing the Leaky Cauldron specialises in it is grease."

Hermione pretended to gag to avoid commenting, and promptly did gag, hunching once more over the toilet bowl, which in turn saved her from having to speak at all for another twenty or so minutes.

By that point, it was only to go over her symptoms.

Throughout the night, her fever persisted, as did her headache and sniffles. The door connecting her bedroom to the nursery was kept locked to prevent Theodore from entering and potentially catching whatever it was she had. Like her own, Tavaris explained (needlessly), Theodore's body ("Immune system," she corrected between pauses for nose-blowing) would be unaccustomed to the exposure of outside sources, making him highly susceptible to any diseases or infections — concerns which were doubly affirmed the following morning, when she woke to discover by a horrendous, unignorable itching that a ghastly greenish rash had developed on her chest overnight.

If there was indeed a God, that God was currently mocking Hermione and Tavaris for their lies.

"*Quarantined*?"

"Dragon Pox is highly contagious, Lady Nott." Healer Gibbon's words were barely discernible behind the barrier of the Bubble-Head Charm, but her condescending tone was, as usual, unmistakable.

"Oh, *really*?" Hermione said acidly, scratching her chest with vigour. "I had no idea."

Tavaris' hand shot out to seize her wrist.

"Do you wish to be Stunned?" he snapped. "Because I guarantee you will be if you keep this up."

Her other hand twitched. She fisted the bedsheets.

"How soon can you obtain the cure?" he asked Healer Gibbon.

“About that … It is not so simple, I fear,” she said, with clear apprehension. The points of her shoes were directed at the exit. “Considering recent events, it would be unwise at the present to … allow anything to go missing from the hospital’s stores.”

Tavaris’ expression cooled. Retaining at least some calm, he said, “It requires brewing, then?”

Healer Gibbon tittered uneasily.

“A regrettably lengthy process,” she said, now inching towards the door, “and most unfortunately, I cannot afford an extended absence such as the one I would have to take if I were to look after your wife whilst waiting on its completion. I have eyes on me, you understand. Unlike yourself, my husband was convicted.”

She had a hand on the doorknob now.

“Hatley,” said Tavaris, in a warning voice.

Smiling tensely, she said in a rush, “I apologise that I couldn’t be of more assistance, Lord Nott,” and sped out the door as if the devil himself was on her heels.

“*HATLEY*!”

But Healer Gibbon’s mind could not be changed. All Tavaris managed to get out of her before she fled was a list of ingredients and hastily written instructions for brewing the cure, which turned out to be a regrettably lengthy process, indeed — and one that he would be taking on himself.

Despite her protests and heatedly given warding suggestions, Hermione was not to stay in the same house as Theodore. Within the hour, she was transferred by Goppy to a room that took up the entirety of the small first floor of a quaint stone house on the other end of the property (whose expansiveness she remained bitter about not being informed of until earlier that month) and had, apparently, once served as the home of a Squib farmhand.

It had clearly not been in use for some time. Old leaves filled the hearth, cobwebs dangled from the low ceiling, and a highly flammable layer of dust coated every surface from the mantlepiece to the quilted bedcovers to the cracked wooden floorboards. Goppy set about cleaning at once, lest Hermione sneezed again and the sparks that flew out of her nose set the whole place ablaze.

Alas, one armchair did not survive the wait.

“It had lost half its stuffing, anyway,” Tavaris dismissed, as he Vanished the blackened remains.

Hermione pressed a damp cloth to her nose miserably.

The next few days passed slowly and unpleasantly. The room rapidly grew muggy, hardly helped by the copper cauldron bubbling atop a long oak table on one end, where Tavaris had set up a makeshift workstation. Opening the windows proved useless, for the humidity felt to

have extended itself outside. Making matters worse, the wind, whilst it seemed to shake the house one second, disappeared the next, refusing to air out the space. Several times a night, Hermione woke either from being overheated, from the increasingly unbearable itchiness of her skin, or in a cold sweat from vivid dreams that did not fade with consciousness.

It was on that first night, upon waking from one of those dreams, that she remembered.

The panic itself frightened her more than anything. What was there to panic about? She had known this would happen; once, she had even looked forward to it. And yet now, for some unthinkable reason, the very possibility sent her heart racing.

She had been to Malfoy Manor yesterday. She had not seen Abraxas, of course, but she had coughed all over his favourite armchair. With a disease as contagious as Dragon Pox, that was surely enough.

At some point in the night, Tavaris had nodded off. He was now slumped over his workstation with his arms folded atop it to act as a pillow, the cauldron simmering hazardously a few inches from his head. As Hermione watched, sat upright in the rickety bed, he shifted in sleep, wriggling his nose where the eagle feather of his quill tickled its tip.

His reaction to the Dark Lord's disappearance would pale in comparison to what he would do when he found out Abraxas was dead.

Hermione considered waking him. She knew, despite his teasing and his insistence upon hating him half the time, Theodore was the only person in the world whom Tavaris loved more than Abraxas. It was not unlikely that the pair of them were the only people whom he loved at all. But what could she say, if she did wake him?

She tried to think, rubbing her collarbone roughly with one of her hands, to which thick blue mittens had been forcibly attached with a Sticking Charm to keep her from scratching herself — she didn't need any more scars. Tavaris had applied a thick layer of Murtlap essence over her rash hours earlier to lessen the itch, but by now she had sweat it all off.

After a while had passed and she had failed to think of anything, she lay back down, feeling helpless and useless in equal measure. All she could do was hope that, when Abraxas did die, the Tavaris whom he left behind would be the silent one.

She told herself this was the only reason she dreaded it.

There were no books to provide her with a distraction as she anxiously awaited the news to break, and only ever Goppy, Tavaris, or Edmund for company, the latter of whom had also contracted Dragon Pox before and was therefore similarly immune. In fact, he and Tavaris had contracted it together back in their mid-thirties. It had, she learned on the fourth day of her isolation, been something of a team effort.

"I'm sorry — you gave *yourselves* Dragon Pox?"

"In a roundabout way, I suppose," Tavaris said, to which Edmund made it a point to add, "It was quite unintentional."

The latter was crouched before the hearth, where he had for hours been working to melt a chunk of antimony over white-hot flames.

“Old Cantankerus was fuming, of course,” he chuckled, as he leaned in to inspect its progress. “He seemed to think the disease would make Tavaris impotent and thereby put an end to —” He broke off with a burst of laughter, ducking as a Duplicate of Tavaris’ pestle came flying at the back of his head.

“The experiment was, however, a success,” Tavaris carried on flippantly, continuing to grind asphodel with his original pestle as though nothing had happened. “And, really, what are a few bumps along the road? At least we were never in hospital for experimenting with *controlled* substances.”

“Because *non-controlled* is so much better?”

“It *is* arguably more productive,” he reasoned.

Hermione opened her mouth, then closed it.

“Well,” she said stiffly, “I can’t argue with that.”

“That wasn’t the first time the two of us wound up in St Mungo’s from an experiment.” Glancing sidelong at her, Tavaris asked curiously, “Have you ever tried drinking Polyjuice Potion of yourself, darling?”

She stared at him.

“No,” she said, after a beat. “I cannot say that I have.”

Tavaris appeared taken aback.

“The very essence of one’s self in liquid form — the possibilities of that have truly never piqued your curiosity?”

Dazedly, Hermione shook her head, for she was now absolutely not about to admit that it had. She recalled what had happened when a strand of Harry’s hair had been added to Polyjuice; the potion had turned to a glittering gold.

Edmund rose, crossed the floor toward her, and dropped onto the surviving armchair to peer at the half-finished puzzle of Uric the Oddball laid out on a tray on the bed.

“Tavaris’ soul resembled a pot of black ink. Tasted like it, too.”

“I understand the *how* bit,” said Hermione, in slight alarm, “but why on — on e—ear—” she stopped to supress a sneeze, her eyes watering, “— on earth do you know what *ink* tastes like?”

“That is neither here nor there,” Tavaris evaded on Edmund’s behalf. “Now, Edmund’s soul, on the other hand, tasted like —”

“Hang on — I thought you s—said — oh, no —”

Hermione failed to stop it this time; green sparks shot out of her nose to land on the bed. She patted the already singed quilt with one mitten to put them out.

“I thought you said you were trying to Polyjuice into *yourselves*?” she managed at last in a nasally voice, holding the tip of her burning nose.

“We were. And we did,” said Edmund. He nodded over at Tavaris. “However, then *he* thought it would be a brilliant idea to sample each other’s before the first had worn off.”

“And then, of course,” said Tavaris, grinning, “we had to pay Abraxas a visit before going to St Mungo’s.”

“Naturally,” said Hermione faintly.

“This was — what — back in ‘forty-three, Tavaris? We weren’t of age yet.”

“Lucretia visited us in hospital, so it would’ve been the summer before our sixth year,” replied Tavaris, taking a pinch of the powdered asphodel and sprinkling it into the cauldron, “whenever that was.”

“Ah … yes, I’d forgotten about that,” said Edmund, sounding thoughtful. He located the puzzle piece that contained the tip of one tentacle and placed it, at last completing the jellyfish that Uric wore as a hat. “But as I was saying, we snuck into the manor whilst everyone was asleep —”

“Which was lucky,” Tavaris put in, picking up his stirring rod, “as Armand Malfoy would’ve strung us up by the socks and left us to dangle off the parapet.”

“— and positioned ourselves right at the foot of Abraxas’ bed, holding a pair of candlesticks we’d found along the way just below our chins for a rather ghoulish effect — as if we needed the help, looking the way we did.”

“The Healers had nicknames for us: Jig and Saw.”

Hermione looked down at the puzzle and grimaced.

Edmund placed another piece, snickering. “Our plan had been to stay put until Abraxas woke, but Tavaris was too impatient for this, of course; he waited all of two minutes before he started kicking at the footboard. I recall Abraxas nearly pissed himself at the sight of us.”

“Oh, no, he did piss himself.”

Edmund snapped his head round.

“You must be joking,” he said, but his whole face had lit up. “You could not possibly know that. There’s no feasible way he would ever admit to …” He trailed off, his mouth falling open in shock. He stared out the window nearest the makeshift workstation.

Tavaris followed his gaze; his eyes went very wide.

He was blocking Hermione's view, preventing her from seeing what had caught their attention. The wind was in one of its more extreme phases; she could hear the glass panes of the window above the bed rattling. Her head throbbed from the noise.

Edmund stood and approached, shaking his head in disbelief.

"What is it?" she asked, wincing.

"It's …" Tavaris, too, trailed off, apparently speechless.

"That's a fucking tornado, that is."

"A *what*?"

"Fucking hell, there's another!" Edmund said incredulously, pointing out the window. "Just there, you see, heading toward … Shit."

"Shit?" repeated Hermione, in a very high voice. "What do you mean, '*Shit*'? Where is it —?"

Tavaris wrenched open the door, already shouting for Goppy, and took off down the stairs without even picking up his walking-stick. There were three small *thuds* in quick succession followed by a much bigger one, when he must have missed a step or two. It sounded like it hurt.

Edmund glanced round at Hermione as she scrambled out of bed to join him before the window, knocking the puzzle over in the process; a thousand pieces went flying and skittering across the floor.

"Theodore will be fine," he assured her, with an ever-so-condescending smirk. "The windows at the main house have been warded and warded again a hundred times over; they are more than sufficiently equipped to deal with this."

"And the windows here?"

His smirk slipped.

"The farmhand was a Squib, he said?"

She nodded.

"Fuck."

Hermione briefly considered warning him to back away from the window. Instead, she took cover behind him just before it blew out. Later, when he was picking the glass out of his hair, she neglected to point out the shards he had missed.

The spell lasted five long hours, and the two of them spent it sat opposite each other on the cold stone floor of the cramped bathroom downstairs, where there was just one window, on which Edmund had cast every spell for reinforcement the both of them knew. As the wind went into a wild frenzy outside, they occupied themselves by starting over the puzzle of Uric the Oddball, with her pointing at pieces with one mitten and him putting them into place.

Roughly two and a half hours in, they were joined by the ghost of an especially exasperated elderly witch, who floated through one wall to perch primly on the rim of the bathtub, introduce herself as Diera Nott, and inform them that the puzzle piece containing the bottom portion of Uric's left earlobe had been missing since 1932.

"You're Theomund's mother," said Hermione, as Edmund upended the whole puzzle in frustration. "You were married to Grindel, the herbologist."

"Sure, I never did have much luck while I was alive, did I?" Diera Nott replied, and she waved one ghostly hand in dismissal. "How is he, then?"

"Grindel?" Hermione frowned. "I'm sorry. He's dead."

"Aye, happy days. I was referring to my son, though."

"Right. He's … erm …" She struggled to think of something nice to say about Theomund Nott.

"The Mudblood mistress lives on," Edmund supplied.

Diera sighed. "So she does," she said grimly. "And what of Rawdon? Tate?"

"It's been a while since I've seen either of —"

"His son's still pretending to be French so —"

"I only ask because Wilfred will be wanting to know," she cut in to clarify. "He and Alwin have gone after the wain just now, she fancies herself a storm chaser."

"*There's a child ghost here*?" said Hermione, in a horrified whisper. She covered her mouth with her hand but immediately had to lower it, unable to breathe through her nose alone. A line of questions had formed in her head and were now butting in front of each other to go first. "Are all the ghosts on this property Notts?"

"By blood, excluding myself — though Alma was disowned and Bramwell too a time or three so perhaps the answer to your question is really a matter of opinion. It was his life's ambition to become a vampire," Diera went on, as though this might possibly explain anything at all, "which did not quite fit in to the family's own interests. Some of the wood panelling still had the stakes on it, last I saw."

"Precisely how many ghosts reside here?" Hermione asked next, as several more questions joined the queue.

"There's a dozen of us now, since Wilfred and I."

“And they were all given firm instructions not to disturb you,” Edmund cut in, giving Diera a pointed look.

“You can keep a secret, though, can you not?” she said coyly.

“I am fond of them.”

He looked at Hermione, who had been struck by a wave of nausea and shifted to lay her head on the cold floor.

“As is the Lady Nott.”

She did not like the way he smirked as he said this.

What did he know? Paranoia was a burning fever of its own. She suddenly feared that Edmund was somehow aware of where she had gone last week. But this could not be; he had heard her give the conductor of the Knight Bus the destination of Diagon Alley, and as that was where Tavaris thought she had been, Edmund must have believed it. He would have told Tavaris the truth of his suspicions, would he not?

Hermione listened carefully to his words in the hours that followed, searching for hints, but there were none, at least that she managed to catch. With her mind so muddled, she didn’t trust that she hadn’t missed anything.

“I suppose this is as good an excuse as any for not attending Morgan Travers’ funeral tomorrow,” Edmund remarked eventually, peering out the window to ensure all was clear. “Regardless of how small, to have not one but *two* tornados …”

There had been one-hundred-and-two, actually. But Hermione let him find this out from the *Prophet*.

A record-breaking event, and with everything that had been going on, it had completely slipped her mind. When she, too, read the *Prophet*’s coverage of it the next day, she was relieved to learn that Cardiff had not been hit. She hoped wherever in Wales that Lyall Lupin lived, it had not been hit, either.

The unfairness of it all smarted. Really, November of 1981 deserved to be uneventful. It had more than earned that luxury.

Edmund was right, though; this was as good an excuse as any for her absence from Morgan Travers’ funeral. Hermione had no doubt Tavaris would take some creative liberties whilst giving it, but even so, he would have lied about the reason for her absence no matter what. No one could know she had Dragon Pox; a person was only supposed to catch it once. At least this way, the lie would be built on a foundation of truth. Tavaris preferred his lies like that, she knew. They had this in common. Unlike him, however, Hermione was actively awaiting the day she would get to tell him which bits were the lies.

For now, she decided to tell him about just one.

“Do pass on my condolences,” she said hoarsely from the bed, as Tavaris straightened the collar of his black funeral robes in the mirror. “You know, for all their many losses.”

He chuckled, as if there had been even an ounce of humour in her sarcasm.

“I doubt you’ll be alone in making that remark today, darling.”

“I can scarcely imagine how devasting it must be,” Hermione went on as though he had not spoken, “to lose so much family in the span of a single year … Because Aisling McKinnon *was* family, wasn’t she, disowned or not. She never stopped be—being their sis—” she had to stop to sneeze, “—sister — or — oh, God —” she sneezed again, “— being their daughter. Ow.”

Tavaris faced her slowly, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

She sniffled and wiped her burning nose with one of his handkerchiefs. Once she could breathe easier again, she said, “When you see him, please tell Lachlan that I will never forgive myself for not thanking Lady Morgan whilst I had the chance. It was ever so kind of her to deliver that letter to me from my late friend Lily.”

For several seconds, Tavaris was silent. She imagined his thoughts whirling not unlike the tornados, summoning forth what she had told him and the Dark Lord that day almost two years ago — that the letter had been slipped to her with a Banishing Spell, and she didn’t know who had cast it.

“Why admit this now?” he asked finally. “She’s already dead.”

“So what if she’s already dead?”

“But what is the point? Nothing can be done.”

“She had him outsmarted,” said Hermione, watching him intently. “She may not haunt him, but that knowledge certainly will.”

As that dreadful November at last came to a close, she could safely say that the best part of her whole month had been the way in which Tavaris had regarded her in that moment, just as he might an undiscovered creature he had happened across in a forest — curiously, from a distance.

Like he didn’t know what she’d do next.

With December came the arrival of the first snowfall, the very same day the cure was completed. It took a few days more for Hermione’s skin to lose the last of its green tinge; she was not released from her sickbed until the following week. By then, the snow had already begun to stick to the ground.

Many times, she had imagined her return to the main house. She had hoped fervently, and perhaps illogically, that she might be met at the doors by a loud and rambunctious child who would leap into her arms and tell her all about what he had done during their time apart. Alas,

though loudness and rambunctiousness did indeed await her, the source of it was not Theodore.

The other Notts had come to spend the holidays.

“We required some excuse as to why we won’t be attending this year’s Yule Gala,” Tavaris explained to Hermione as he set their trunks down in the master bedroom of Nottingham Hall. “I had to decline the invitation, seeing as I didn’t know when you’d stop being green — and as you must realise, it is highly suspicious to be the colour green.”

Most conveniently, Rawdon and Aleena Nott’s daughter, Odelyn, had recently gotten engaged, providing them all with a reasonable excuse for another family reunion so soon after the last: meeting her fiancé.

Jules Beaulieu was an opinionated, poor-postured, and questionably flamboyant Frenchman who wore jewelled rings and was set to inherit his family’s Grand Marque, produced at which was the only wizarding champagne on the market: Beau Champagne.

“If you start playing French …” Rawdon tried to warn his daughter at dinner the night of the gala, only to be immediately interrupted by his son, who slammed his goblet down so hard the wine sloshed over the rim to splatter the tablecloth and exclaimed, “Je vis en France depuis l’âge de dix ans!”

Aleena threw her cutlery down, her roast ragefully abandoned.

“*How many times will you make me say it*?” she seethed.

Barnett threw down his own cutlery.

“Now look what you ‘ave done,” Tate said, looking accusingly at Rawdon. She scoffed. “Missgeburt.”

Aunt Adalaide drew a sharp, furious breath. Tavaris covered up a laugh with a cough, then seemed to wonder why he was bothering and laughed outright.

“Tu m’as envoyé dans une école Française,” Barnett was now pointing out hotly, “à quoi t’attendais-tu, Mamá?”

“Speaks French, uses Greek pronunciation,” Rawdon huffed, at the same time that Aleena screeched, “YOU WERE BORN IN *ASSOS*!”

“Ach, *Aleena*,” groaned Terric, “leave the Froschfessers be.”

Theomund hooted with laughter. Further down the table, Odelyn shot an apprehensive glance at her fiancé, who made an exaggerated noise of disgust.

“Je n’ai pas signé pour un dîner avec rosbifs et boches.”

And just like that, the whole table was up in arms, defending their cuisines and shouting about wars they had not even fought.

By all appearances, Theodore was highly entertained, though this was perhaps due to six-year-old Delany teaching him how to catapult his peas. In their defence, peas were not the only food to soar across the table that night. The state of her blood pressure aside, Hermione much preferred this to attending the gala. Polite conversation with preening peacocks and simpering sycophants was a familiar entity, but spontaneous food fights felt like dinner at the Burrow (although that food tended to be the sort that one ought to avoid eating, anyway, lest one should find oneself suddenly a large canary).

That night, she slept more soundly than she had in months — quite comfortably, too, on the plush mattress of a mahogany four-poster in an unoccupied bedroom on the first level of the family apartments, not on the nursery loveseat.

The shell room, it was called, for lining the walls in neat order were what must have been nearly a thousand seashells. Even the buttons on the ottoman at the foot of the bed had seashells attached to them, and sculpted mermaids were carved on to the bedposts. Apparently, Morwenna Nott, the youngest daughter of Alwin I, had been quite the collector and possessed a fervent interest in aquatic wildlife. Her journal, packed with research on the subject, became Hermione's reading before bed. When Theodore inevitably crept down from the nursery to join her, she read it aloud until he fell asleep.

The third week of December, she moved on to Alwin's journal, which pertained solely to architecture, and then to that of Theomund IV, a slightly more recent Nott (that was to say, he had lived after the invention of the calendar), whose own special interest had been astrology, with a fixation on the movements and lifespans of the stars.

In addition to her reading, she entertained herself by putting only the most English cuisine on the menu and telling Goppy to serve Jules Beaulieu his meat well done.

Christmas came and went with no temporary castrations. Theodore, though still non-verbal, was in higher spirits than he had been since October. He spent most of the morning chasing Delany throughout the Great Hall (from which Hermione had ordered the grand piano removed), both of them crawling under furniture and running between (and sometimes directly into) legs. Not once did he manage to catch his cousin. Initially, Hermione thought he took this defeat extremely well. After lunch, however, she and Tavaris came across several of Delany's Christmas presents stashed behind a suit of armour. Hermione did not take this extremely well, or well at all.

"At this rate, he's going to grow up to become a thief!" she exclaimed at Tavaris' back as they turned into the east wing on the first floor. "And he didn't even do it with the intention of playing with Delany's toys himself, clearly, because he just hid them away in the entry hall of all places! Where are we —?"

She drew up short as Tavaris pulled open one of the tall oak doors lining the walls. He held it and nodded into the room beyond.

"Is this where my gift supposedly is, then?" she asked suspiciously, staying put. She sent him a sharp look. "Were you listening to a word of what I just said?"

“Every last one. I merely assumed my responses would be a great source of resentment for you and elected not to give them.”

“If only you’d do that more often.”

Tavaris elected not to respond to this, either. He nodded inside again, his eyes alight with eagerness.

Apprehensively, Hermione peered into the room. It was a big, bright space, with blue-curtained windows along one wall and a hardwood floor that shined in the bounce of light. On one end was a vast collection of toys, arranged neatly on an indigo rug, and on the other, a desk which faced the rest, and a satisfyingly clean blackboard behind it. She went no further than the doorway, not until Tavaris did.

“*This* is my Christmas present? A schoolroom?”

“You wish to be in charge of his education,” Tavaris explained simply, coming to stand beside a table that had two tiny chairs and didn’t reach his knees. “Here — once they’ve gotten a bit older, mind you — you will be able to teach both Theodore and Draco together, and in a more structured, school-like environment.”

Oak cabinets lined the wall beneath the windows; running along the tops were encyclopaedias, baskets of stationary and art supplies, and titles such as, *Jiggery Pokery and Hocus Pocus*, *Beguiling Brews for Beginners*, *A Children’s Anthology of Monsters*, and — this one, Hermione stopped and picked up — *Hogwarts: A History*.

Her heart swelled, and just as quickly rose to her throat. She glanced back at Tavaris.

“Don’t ever gift me a library,” she said.

He looked nonplussed.

“Darling, I never even told you where the library *was*.”

On the way back downstairs, Hermione questioned the validity of whatever statement Tavaris had interpreted as Lucius and Narcissa’s approval of her teaching their son. Shouldn’t they fear she would infect his mind with her many disreputable ideas? She wouldn’t, of course, and she would fail if she tried, but they didn’t know that.

“Just wait,” Tavaris said with a satisfied smile, “those two will be thick as thieves by the time they start at Hogwarts. Figuratively speaking, of course,” he added, at the look Hermione gave him.

That afternoon, she tried to explain to Theodore, as gently as she could so as not to impede his improvement, that stealing was very, very wrong. He had the audacity to feign tears. Yet she could not find it within herself to be too cross; any sign of mischief was a sign of recovery. It also reminded her bittersweetly of Rose, who had very early on identified crying as a powerful manipulation tactic, especially when it came to Ron.

Hermione spent the last week of 1981 positively sizzling with indignance over the realisation that, this time round, she was going to have to be the soft parent.

On the morning of New Year's Eve, she uneagerly removed her belongings from the shell room to accommodate the arrival of Abraxas (who, as of yet, showed no sign of illness) and Evangeline Malfoy and Edmund and Desdemona Lestrange, all of whom Tavaris preferred to have in the family apartments rather than legitimate family members and all of whom were certain to be in too rough a state to make it through the Floo in the wee hours of the following morning. With the shell and robin rooms (the latter named for an avid bird-watcher of the past) occupied, Hermione had no option but to reacquaint herself with the nursery loveseat. No one dared occupy the heir's bedroom.

That night, she lingered amidst the loud and exuberant drunkenness to wait out the end of 1981. At the stroke of midnight, numerous bottles of Beau Champagne were popped all at once; their sounds echoed throughout the Great Hall alongside a chorus of cries and ringing laughter, backed by the jaunty tunes emitting from a large gramophone.

Her left forearm itched and flared like a half-healed burn. She slipped out and up to bed shortly after the first toast.

It felt to her as though she had gone the whole year without sleep, yet even now that it was over, the exhaustion refused to kick in. As she lay curled on the loveseat, she imagined that powdery black mist seeping upstairs, creeping beneath the closed door, and consuming the nursery and all within it. An irrational fear, certainly, but she stared at the door for hours, nonetheless, waiting for the mist to appear. When she eventually nodded off, it did; she was jolted awake, the back of her nightdress drenched in cooling sweat.

For several minutes, Hermione paced the floor whilst Theodore slept on. Finally, she caved and left the family apartments to see for herself; from the first-floor bannister, she peered down at the Great Hall, taking long, steadying breaths.

Only a handful of the men remained awake, and they were all unmasked and perfectly in sight, as was the furniture on which they lounged, and on which Geoffrey Mulciber had passed out and was now being shoved off onto the floor by Terric. Some fifty yards away though she was, Hermione could still make out Geoffrey's continued snoring.

Abruptly, the Lestranges' house-elf, Rascal — who had both his eyes still but wouldn't when he oversaw the daily goings-on at S.P.E.W.'s headquarters — appeared to whisper something to Edmund. With a nod and a signal to Tavaris, Edmund heaved himself off the sofa and towards the entry hall.

At the sound of the front doors opening but not closing, Hermione moved closer to the stairs and listened in. Although she could not make out the words being exchanged, the voice of the four o'clock visitor was easily discernible; she knew few others so well who spoke in an accent like Mundungus Fletcher's.

Out the window, she spotted a car idling at the front gates. A stolen one, probably. Mundungus had arrived at Number 12 Grimmauld Place for Christmas in 1995 by means of a stolen vehicle, and with a Christmas tree that had likely been similarly obtained.

But what on earth was he doing here?

When the doors closed and Edmund returned alone to the Great Hall, he said loudly, “We’re in business, boys,” and held up to the others a (*For the love of God.*) vial of fine white powder.

Hence the Muggle money that had been in his pocket, she thought. Also, the suspiciously small silver spoon. The name rang true even in the wizarding world: the rich man’s drug.

Could they be any more stereotypical?

Hermione retrieved her jaw from the floor and, in a stunned daze, went back to bed. Sleep came easier this time, thanks to the comforting knowledge that only normal nefariousness was taking place below her, not murder.

Three hours later, Theodore was prodding her awake.

And in her lingering exasperation, as the two of them took breakfast in the morning room, she said, “The other adults went to bed very late last night, so I expect they’ll be sleeping all morning. Especially Pa and his friends, they played in the snow almost until the sun came up.”

Theodore’s response to this was to pull at his eyelashes.

“Yes,” said Hermione, as she stirred milk into her tea, “I do believe snowflakes landed on their noses and eyelashes.”

She interfered when he tried to recreate the image by grabbing the saucer and attempting to pour milk on his head. Then, wishing mightily to snap instead, she praised him for correctly identifying the colour white.

Pop!

Dinky rushed toward her so speedily, Hermione had no idea whether it was them or Goppy who had appeared until they were already at her side and going up on the tips of their toes to whisper worriedly into her ear, “*The Aurors is back, Mistress*.”

Hermione kept her face impassive.

“All right,” she said, in a voice that teetered on being too high. “Thank you, Dinky.”

She set her tea down on the table and rose to her feet.

“Stay with him — *here*,” she added, giving Dinky a significant look. She didn’t want Theodore to hear her say, “Don’t let him leave this room.” She kissed the top of his head and told him that someone was at the door and that he ought to have eaten all his breakfast by the time she returned.

Once on the stairs, she summoned Goppy for backup.

“Dinky was telling them to stay put and wait, Mistress,” Goppy informed her, bobbing hurriedly down the steps at her side, “*and they is*. Goppy does not think it is being emergent. Not a raid, no, no, no. Goppy’s old heart cannot survive another raid.”

“How many of them are here?”

“Three, Mistress. It is the lion-looking one, the dark-skinned one, and the one with the many deformities.”

“Don’t call them deformities,” said Hermione sharply. “You know what was done to him.”

“Gobby knows nothing of the sort,” replied Goppy. “Goppy is trained to know nothing of the sort.” Very seriously, he added in an undertone, “Goppy is very good at knowing nothing of the sort.”

She had surpassed exasperation, and as they reached the ground floor, she only asked, “Have you woken Tavaris?”

“Master was saying only to wake him if there is a fire.”

“Lovely.”

“Or if Mistress Mione runs away.”

“Of course.”

“Or if Mistress Mione is armed.”

“I’ll bear that in mind, then,” said Hermione shortly, and she opened the doors. “May I help you, Auror Moody?”

There was no point in putting on a pleasant disposition. Moody had seen her coming; he knew there was nothing pleasant about her current disposition.

“I take it your husband’s still asleep?” he inquired, as if his magical eye was not currently directed upward to locate Tavaris himself.

“I believe just about everyone is, sir, given the hour.”

“But not you?”

“I have a two-year-old.”

Moody grunted as if to acknowledge this as a fair point. Stood behind him on the snow-covered steps were Rufus Scrimgeour and Kingsley Shacklebolt, the latter of whom she would need to speak to Goppy about describing more creatively.

“We received report of a death at this residence.”

Goppy gave a little gasp.

“A death?” repeated Hermione, thinking she had heard wrong. “You must be mistaken, no one has died here.” *Today.*

Judging by the expression on Moody’s face, he had heard what had gone unsaid. She feared, if he entered, he would recall what else had happened here — to him. But, of course, this was what the black mist had been for.

“Respectfully, Lady Nott,” said Moody, somewhat respectfully, “are you so sure you know everything that goes on round here?”

“Who reported a death?” she asked, because she was not stupid enough to answer that last question.

Moody didn’t answer her question, either. He half-answered another, though.

“Let’s start by you leading us to the Lestranges’ room.”

“The Lestranges …” Hermione felt as if she were missing several pieces of a puzzle. She shook herself slightly, stepped aside to let the three of them in, and began leading the way upstairs, Goppy sticking to her side.

“Who else is currently in residence?” Scrimgeour asked.

“Er — the whole — the whole extended family, sir,” she said, discombobulated. “Abraxas and Evangeline Malfoy as well and … and the Lestranges …” She glanced back at him. “Who —?”

“How many people is that in total?” he interrupted. He had a quill out and was taking notes as he climbed the stairs.

“Twenty, including myself, but —”

Moody interrupted this time. “Anyone else here last night?”

“Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy, Gaspar and Bedelia Avery, and Geoffrey Mulciber — *just who have you been told is dead*?” she raced to finish.

She caught Scrimgeour exchange an inscrutable look with Kingsley, who, after a moment, said, “The death was reported by a house-elf who goes by the name Rascal.”

They had arrived at the doors to the family apartments, and Hermione stopped asking questions. She turned to look at them all.

“My son is in the next room, so I’d appreciate it if you didn’t go about this like you did last time.”

She did not let them inside until she had received three nods.

Theo went stiff in his seat as the group passed the archway that led into the morning room. Hermione paused her stride briefly to explain, “Theodore, everything’s OK, Aurors Moody,

Shacklebolt, and Scrimgeour are just here to speak to Edmund and Desdemona. You stay there with Dinky, all right?"

He made no sign of having heard her; his gaze was fixated on Moody, Kingsley, and Scrimgeour. Dinky shifted closer and nudged his plate to get him to keep eating.

Hermione took a deep breath once out of Theodore's line of sight and wished fervently to cast a Muffling Charm. When she glanced over her shoulder, however, she found Moody doing just this; silent though the spell was, she recognised the wide arc he drew over the threshold. She gave Moody a grateful look and received a small nod in return.

Outside the door to the shell room at the end of the hallway, she knocked once, softly so as not to wake the Malfoys in the room behind her, and whispered, "The Aurors are here."

After a second, a single weak voice sounded from within.

"Let them in."

Hermione inhaled sharply. Moody hobbled forward, and she stepped back on wobbly legs to let him open the door.

A slim stream of light slipped into the darkened bedroom. All she could make out was the outline of a lone figure hunched on the ottoman at the foot of the bed; as Moody opened the door the rest of the way, the stream of light widened and stretched to reveal Desdemona in her black velvet dressing gown.

She was so still that Hermione could not tell whether she was breathing or not. Not even when Moody stepped wordlessly into the room did she so much as lift her head. He, Kingsley, and Scrimgeour all lit the tips of their wands.

"Lady Lestrange," Moody began in a low voice, but he stopped short, the glow of his wand suddenly reaching the bed and illuminating that which lay upon it.

Sprawled in a tangle of linen bedsheets was Edmund, his limbs outstretched and bent at awkward angles, his skin a mottled purple and a frothy sick staining his chin, and his jaw stretched wide as though in a final, jolting gasp. His dark eyes were open and unblinking.

Goppy staggered into the door to the robin room behind him with a small shriek.

Just then, a muffled sobbing reached Hermione's ears; at first, she thought it might have been coming from Desdemona, but Scrimgeour then shone his wand over the chest of drawers, beside which Rascal the house-elf was crouched, his face buried in the black pillowcase he wore. He was shaking profusely.

"Time of death?" Moody asked, peering at Edmund's body.

Desdemona shook her head slightly. She appeared to be in a state of shock.

"*Cause* of death?"

But the answer to this became clear the next second without a word from her, once more by the light of a wand: thin white lines, neatly cut, on the surface of the bedside table closest to Edmund.

Moody's expression was one of grim satisfaction.

"Well now," he muttered, "that's a good bit of irony there."

Hermione got the impression he felt as though he had just been told an especially dark joke and wished he were surrounded by the sort of people with whom he could appreciate it more openly.

"Either of you seen this before?" he asked Kingsley and Scrimgeour, who came closer for a better look, twin expressions of bemusement on their faces. "Nah, I reckon you wouldn't have, would you? It's a little something the Muggles cooked up, a drug, they ingest it through the nose —" And he pointed, with humour, to the spot where his nose used to be.

Hermione did not find this funny. Neither did Kingsley, who knelt in front of Desdemona to check her over. He had her follow his wand light with her eyes.

Beside Hermione, Goppy was whimpering softly into his hands. Suddenly, he gave a great jolt and stumbled sideways into her leg as the door to the robin room abruptly opened; Abraxas stepped out into the hallway, frowning and in the middle of pulling on his dressing gown.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded sharply, shutting the door behind him with a snap. His cold, accusatory gaze leapt from Kingsley and Desdemona to Scrimgeour to Moody before finally landing on Edmund.

Moody harrumphed.

"I'd wondered what that expression might look like on *your* pasty mug, Malfoy."

Abraxas did not seem to hear him; his lips were parted, and he was staring blankly, as though unable to process what he was seeing. After a moment, he made as if to enter the room, and Hermione seized his arm to stop him.

Scrimgeour exchanged glances with Moody before plucking an empty vial off the other bedside table.

"Sleeping Draught," he gathered with a sniff, and he looked back at Desdemona. "Do you have trouble sleeping, Lady Lestrange?"

Rascal began rocking himself back and forth.

"He becomes … restless, when he does it," Desdemona started, in stilted explanation. Still, she barely moved. "He will ramble and pace the floor and when he finally goes to bed …" Her voice drifted, as did her gaze; she stared at the seashells on the wall as though in a trance.

"Go on," prompted Kingsley.

“He has kept me up before, because of it,” she said, “when he’s lying there and shifting his jaw, again and again until … until I can hear the birds chirping, and I realise I have spent the whole night wide awake, listening to the clacking of his teeth …”

Hermione realised belatedly that her fingers were digging into Abraxas’ forearm. She did not bother to loosen her grip. He didn’t seem to care; in fact, he lifted a hand to hold hers there — and of course, he did, for it hit her then that she was covering his Dark Mark.

“So I took a Sleeping Draught,” Desdemona finished softly, looking up at everyone at last, “and I didn’t hear him at all.”

“To be perfectly clear, Lady Lestrange,” said Scrimgeour with a frown, taking his notepad and quill back out, “you are saying that while you were sleeping last night, your husband overdosed on this — this *Muggle* substance, for which he has long had a certain — er — affinity — and this morning you woke to find him already dead?”

She closed her eyes and nodded.

“And was it at that point that you sent your elf to fetch us?”

“It seemed the right thing to do, I — I couldn’t think what else.”

Moody’s magical eye had stopped circling the room to stay centred upon Hermione and Abraxas, but at this, it shifted to Desdemona’s back. His other eye narrowed suspiciously.

“It never once crossed your mind to let anyone here know their friend was dead?”

“No,” whispered Desdemona, her voice sounding terribly small. “I wasn’t — I did not think of anyone else, I thought only of …” She held fast to one of the bedposts and dropped her head.

Abraxas made a low growling noise at the back of his throat. Hermione glanced up at him to find his stare much less blank than it had been a moment ago.

“Right,” Moody said gruffly after a long pause, as Kingsley rose back to his feet. “We’re sealing the room.”

“Moody, the cause of death is quite —”

“I think we ought to send for a Healer to verify —”

“This is a crime scene till I say otherwise!” snapped Moody.

Kingsley looked resigned, meanwhile Scrimgeour sighed slightly in exasperation. Neither of them argued, however; the latter raised his wand and, making a motion as though drawing a wave in the air, Conjured a white sheet, which drifted down to settle gently over Edmund’s body.

“Lady Lestrange, you’ll be accompanying Shacklebolt to the Ministry to await further questioning. And Shacklebolt,” Moody barked as Kingsley helped Desdemona from the

room, “I want you to make contact with the rest of the Lestrange family, we’ll be needing his next of kin — non-imprisoned kin, that is —”

Scrimgeour snorted.

Rascal let out a loud, shuddering wail.

“And take your bloody elf with you —”

“She cannot,” Abraxas interrupted coldly, as Kingsley and Desdemona slipped past and down the hallway. “She is not a Lestrange anymore. He no longer serves her.”

“Rascal,” Hermione piped up. Her voice was quivering; she swallowed in the attempt to steady it somewhat. “Rascal, you can wait here for the other Lestranges but you must leave the room now. It’ll be all right.”

Rascal kept rocking himself, inconsolable. Abraxas was now breathing very heavily; Hermione could feel the tension in his muscles, his forearm like stone under her hand. Goppy was trying to hide his tears by crying into the fabric of her dressing gown.

Just when she and Kingsley neared the main doors, Desdemona glanced back over her shoulder. In better lighting, Hermione could now see properly the sickly pallor of her sunken face, as if she were running a fever, and how very swollen and sleepless her eyes were, smudged with charcoal from the night before.

But it was what happened next that truly struck Hermione: when Desdemona met her gaze, and winked.

“Whe’e Mun-mun go?”

Hermione’s eyes went even wider. She felt Abraxas’ startle and held herself very still; breathlessly, she turned her head to locate him.

Theodore was standing next to Goppy on her left, with Dinky on his other side and gazing into the shell room in silent horror. She hadn’t noticed either of them leave the morning room.

“Whe’e Stan?” Theodore asked worriedly, looking all about. His voice was thin and raspy. “Whe’e Rod-fuss?”

Chapter End Notes

You’d really think life would be less busy after end-of-year exams, but this took ages to complete. Hope it was worth the wait:)

Desdemona's name comes from Shakespeare's 'Othello'. As (spoiler) she is murdered in bed by her husband, I thought this little Uno-reverso would be funny. To me, at least.

Also, if you ever have writer's block, look up the weather. You'll be surprised by what you find. I sure as shit didn't expect tornados.

The Club Treasurer

Chapter Summary

> I can’t break the cycle, am I just a fool?
> Falling down like dominoes, hit by family jewels
> Pass it down from kid to kid, the chain will never end
> — The Family Jewels, MARINA

Chapter Notes

> CW: a couple of nerds nerding out, but I swear it's brief.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On January the first of 1982, Edmund Lestrange passed calmly into the Beyond; a place of peace that the living could not reach, and from which the dead could not return. Although to the living this meant farewell, and the colour black was worn to say good-bye, from a great big window in the Beyond Edmund watched over them still. Even though they could not hear him, he was laughing at all their jokes, cheering them on every step of the way, and would do so until the time came that it was their turn to join him. On that day, he would be there to welcome them with open arms.

This was how Harry explained death to his children, and this is how Hermione explained it to Theodore.

She had wondered before, when and by what means Edmund Lestrange would meet his end. But she could never have imagined this. The Auror Office (Moody, to be specific) was looking to launch an investigation, and for once, Tavaris was in agreement with them.

“You recall what I told you about her — about her brother?” he said to Hermione roughly ten hours into the new year, after he had finally been woken by Abraxas to learn what had happened. “He was found dead the night before the reading of their parents’ will, drank from the wrong cup and left everything to her.”

Tavaris was practically vibrating, so visibly full of a rage that seemed to be shoving at his insides to be let out. The glint in his eyes, she would never forget.

“Edmund did not — *did not* — overdose.”

But, for better or for worse, it looked as though Edmund had, and on a Muggle drug, too. That he had ever been a user of it in the first place was information the rest of the Lestrange family did not, under any circumstances, want public; within hours of their arrival from France by International Portkey, they had expressed this desire quite severely to the Auror Office. The investigation never left the ground.

That wink was the last Hermione ever saw of Desdemona.

“I’d wager she’s on a tropical island somewhere by now, bathing in hush money,” Geoffrey Mulciber theorised the day of the funeral, at which Desdemona had reportedly been absent. It had been held in Paris, where Edmund had been laid to rest in the Lestrange Mausoleum at the Père Lachaise Cemetery.

“Daft, the whole family,” Tavaris said through gritted teeth, “to think she required further incentive to keep her mouth shut.”

“If only it ended at hush money,” said Abraxas spitefully.

Tavaris gave a mirthless chuckle.

“What’s hush money?” Theodore whispered.

Hermione looked away from the entrance to the Nott Estate’s sitting room, where Geoffrey, Tavaris, and Abraxas all sat in that same tableau they had twice before, with just one less person each time.

It was becoming an ominous sight to behold.

She twisted on the dining-room chair to face Theodore properly. He was dressed as if to attend a funeral himself, for he had wished to wear all black like everyone else. He had even tried to put a black jumper on Crookshanks, which had not quite gone in either of their favours — nor the jumper’s.

She tried to think of what to tell him.

“Sometimes,” she began tentatively after a moment, “when someone wants really badly for someone else to keep a secret for them, they might pay that person money to not tell anyone. We call that hush money because it pays for someone’s silence. However,” she added strictly, “doing this is also called *bribery*, which is against the law and must never ever be done.”

Theodore appeared to consider this for a few minutes, turning back to his dinner with a thoughtful expression.

“Evangeline was speaking to Quintilla Lestrange earlier,” Abraxas continued back in the sitting room, “and she informed her that Desdemona managed to convince the more naïve of her sons to set some gold aside for her, in case anything should happen to the lot of them in the war and she were left with nothing. Her own inheritance, of course, would have gone to Edmund when they were married, but perhaps that is what Rabastan put in the vault.”

Finally, Theodore looked up from his mutton stew.

“We tell Kingsy now?” he asked.

Hermione’s chest ached something awful. She took the cloth napkin from her lap to wipe a bit of excess stew off his chin and sighed.

“No, my love,” she said regretfully. “We tell no one.”

Theodore mulled this over as well for a minute, then asked shrewdly, “We get hush money for Ha’we’en, too?”

It was the first he had ever spoken of that night, in the week since he had begun to speak again at all. Now, he only spoke when he felt he had something important to say, but he was speaking, and that alone had her grateful beyond what words could ever describe.

Hermione wished sorely for a handbook to explain what to do in this situation, but she doubted the existence of one suitable. It was not as though anyone went about writing parenting books on how to tell one’s child about their father’s criminal activity. When he had asked if Rabastan and Rodolphus, too, had gone into the Beyond, she had said they were living in that tall tower by the sea from the story, and that was where “Gus” and “Batty” had gone to live as well.

She hadn’t yet worked out how to fit the criminal bit in.

Eventually, she replied to the latest question, “No, we didn’t, but we mustn’t tell anyone about it, anyway.”

She set the napkin down and took his little hands in her own.

“You can talk to me about Hallowe’en, though, if you’d like,” she said, gazing at him hopefully. “It might be good to talk about it; talking about scary things often helps people be not so scared of them anymore.”

Theodore glanced sidelong into the sitting room. He seemed to be drawing a connection, but not the one she expected.

“Talking don’t help, Ma. Yaco’s scared of all ‘ings still.”

And there went her argument, straight out the window.

Hermione sighed again.

“It’s ‘*doesn’t* help’. ‘Don’t help’ is improper grammar.”

Just then, she spotted Goppy in the hall, poking his head into the sitting room. He seemed wary of interrupting; his bat-like ears were twitching anxiously. Quietly, Hermione called him over.

“What is it, Goppy?” she asked, in the same lowered voice with which she and Theodore had been conversing.

Goppy was gripping a glass jar tight in his bony hands. He appeared conflicted. For several seconds, he continued to struggle with himself, before, with equal measures of care and reluctance, he handed her the jar.

“Goppy was dusting in the laboratory, Mistress,” he began, low and halting, as Hermione inspected the jar; it contained what appeared to be a few clippings of Queen Anne’s lace.

“What laboratory?”

“At Nottingham Hall, Mistress.”

Of course, she thought, rolling her eyes. *Yet another bloody room no one thought to tell me about.*

“The storeroom, it is always becoming so dusty,” Goppy told her, shaking his head mournfully. “Master Wilfred was casting the *Impervius* on the stores, less dust for Goppy, but Master Tavaris forgets — his mind is already so full, Goppy means, so, so full.” He gulped. “Goppy was expecting dust … Goppy notices the jar in Mistress Mione’s hands has none … Only jar not having dust … But no one was being in the laboratory since Master Tavaris before the snow comes.”

Frowning, Hermione turned over the jar. The worn label read: *Cicuta maculata*.

“Water hemlock,” she murmured, her frown deepening. She looked up. “Goppy, this plant is poisonous.”

He nodded gravely. The next second, his eyes shot wide, as it seemed to dawn on him that she was holding poison.

And perhaps Hermione would have used it, for something or for someone, but the realisation had Goppy clapping his hands over his ears and hurtling toward the sitting room, and she hurried after him before he could announce to everyone that she was armed.

“Water hemlock,” she said in a rush, holding the jar out to Tavaris. “Goppy was dusting in the laboratory and noticed it was the only item without dust, meaning someone recently moved it.”

“Probably Theomund,” Abraxas murmured disinterestedly into his tumbler. Beside him on the sofa, however, Tavaris’ expression had darkened. He took the jar to inspect it himself.

“Water hemlock is a highly toxic plant,” Hermione said, looking seriously at Abraxas. “It’s closely related to common hemlock, which is known for —” she spelt it so Theodore wouldn’t understand, “— K-I-L-L-I-N-G Socrates.”

“Am I meant to know who that is?”

“He was a philosopher who believed we ought to be aware of our own ignorance,” Tavaris muttered, distracted, “so no, you wouldn’t have heard of him.”

Abraxas opened his mouth, looking affronted —

Hermione huffed impatiently. “It’s infused with cicutoxin, particularly in its roots, the toxin is more concentrated there —”

“The roots have been clipped off,” interrupted Tavaris. His jaw was very tight. “This jar contained the roots.”

“You’re certain?” asked Geoffrey, heaving himself up from the opposite sofa. He crossed the room to join them, a tad ungracefully.

“If ingested, water hemlock can rapidly generate potentially fatal symptoms,” Hermione explained; “convulsions, abdominal cramps, and nausea are all common … as is D-E-A-T-H.”

“Such as with an overdose,” said Abraxas slowly, cottoning on.

“Those who survive it often end up with amnesia.”

“Tremors, too,” added Tavaris, still looking at the jar.

“So had he survived … he might not have remembered it?” asked Geoffrey. He directed this question at Hermione.

“It’s *possible* …” she hedged. Abraxas was looking at her, too, for an answer. “But that wouldn’t have mattered, would it? Not if the toxin was injected into something else, making it look as though *that* were the true cause of it. I think it is far more likely that he would have wound up …” *Oh, my,* she thought, and she pressed her lips together, for she could sense some hysteria-infused humour creeping onto her face, “… well … that he would have wound up a patient in the Janus Thickey Ward.”

Geoffrey and Abraxas exchanged a significant look. After a long moment, the latter said, “Do you suppose Rascal stole it for her?”

Hermione felt herself go a little pale.

“Rascal would *never* have done a *thing* to harm him,” she said sharply. “You saw him yourself, Abraxas! You saw how devasted he was! Besides, even if he wanted to, a house-elf is unable to harm the people they serve.”

“Not knowingly,” said Abraxas meaningfully.

“Well, he would certainly know by now!” she snapped. “And he would’ve told the Lestranges. He would’ve told the Aurors when he reported it!”

“Not if he was awaiting instructions,” Abraxas pointed out, this theory of his seeming to gain traction in his mind. He sat up straighter, his face cold and hardened. “And the Lestranges would not have told anyone, either, would they? They covered it all up, paid her off before they even came here to fetch Rascal from you.”

“I’d wager she knew they would,” sneered Geoffrey, with a mutinous expression, nodding along. A bit of spittle from his mouth landed on Hermione’s face; she grimaced in disgust

and wiped it off with her sleeve as he continued. “All she had to do was make herself scarce before Rascal told them — before they took matters into their own hands.”

“Or before *we* did,” said Tavaris, in a voice tinged with venom. “If Desdemona has any brains at all, she will never return to Britain.”

There was an eery silence as he and Abraxas both stared off in opposite directions, perhaps each imagining some cruel and gruesome fate which he would set upon Desdemona if he ever saw her again.

Then Geoffrey took a hefty gulp from his drink, smacked his lips (Hermione stepped away this time to dodge the spittle), and grunted.

“There’s two mysteries solved, then,” he said gruffly. “That eyepatch Rascal had on at the funeral? Yeah … the Lestranges know.”

Hermione stared at him with her mouth agape. She felt faint.

“You lot really do enjoy taking an eye for an eye, don’t you?”

Geoffrey gave another grunt, which might have been agreement.

“We probably have too much time on our hands,” he admitted.

She wondered just how much. With Edmund gone, either Geoffrey or Abraxas were next. For a reason she had no desire to decipher, this thought brought her no joy.

*

In the weeks that passed after Edmund’s funeral, the snowfall continued to build, inching higher up the walls of the estate than it had in years and pouring through the bars of the wrought-iron fence with such gusto it was as though it was flaunting its ability to do so. Bundled in their warmest gear, Theodore and Draco spent many an afternoon forming an army of snow angels, until the packed ground had risen over their heads and it was no longer safe for them to play outside — unless, of course, someone had a wand to melt down the snow for them. But Narcissa loathed the cold.

In the company of other children, Theodore seemed to be at his best. He scarcely spoke to Draco, but he did something even better: he laughed. And anyway, Draco talked enough for them both.

The days swiftly blended, though, dulled by the monotony of children’s play paired with tea and meaningless conversation, reread books, and countless cracked eggshells from walking around Tavaris, whose moods changed more frequently than the tides. One afternoon during Theodore’s nap, he claimed the tea tasted “off” and, in his frustration, threw his teacup at the sitting-room wall; ten hours later, his usual late-night stupor brought him to Hermione’s door, in search, she was slow to realise, of comfort.

Hermione was uncertain what her life here would look like now that the war was over. Not unlike Tavaris, she did not know her purpose anymore. Being a mother counted as one, of

course, but was that truly all? She had never planned on being just a mother.

Growing up, she had always wanted to have children — children whom she could guide and inspire and whom she could watch grow to become someone extraordinary, and then get to tell people, “See that one there? *I* raised them.” But this was just it: she had wanted children; she hadn’t ever really thought about being a mother. The two things had not seemed connected.

It was Ginny who had brought this missight to her attention, albeit unknowingly.

“When I was little, I only ever wanted *three* things out of life,” Ginny had said, sat at the Burrow’s kitchen table and pouring herself a fifth glass of her mother’s spiked eggnog. A wizard's hat striped like a candy cane from James Sirius' Christmas cracker had been perched crookedly on her head. “To have my face on a Quidditch poster, to outdo Mum in mumming, and to have enough money that my kids would always have top-of-the-line broomsticks. And you know what? I’ve posed for about fifty Quidditch posters, I’ve yet to mix up any of my kids’ names, and just last week Harry and I got Lily her first broom. Did you know they make Firebolts for toddlers now?”

All of a sudden, Hermione had realised that motherhood had played no role in her fantasies of the future. Now, it seemed this would be the only role she had at all. Already, it did not feel like enough.

Perhaps Tavaris had sensed this in her, and that was why he had put together the schoolroom — to provide purpose, and thus reduce the chance of her leaving. But it would be at least another year before Theodore and Draco were old enough to teach. In the meantime, what else was there to do with herself?

It was with great unhappiness that Hermione penned her next letter, which began, regrettably, *Dear Madam Parkinson*.

She did not get much further than this before a knock came at her bedroom door. Not a second later, Tavaris entered, the knock more of a warning than a request. She let her quill hover.

“Can I help you?” she nearly said, but his current mood was unclear, so she held her tongue.

He was dressed as he typically was whenever he had a business meeting, which was to say, rather reminiscent of Winston Churchill — minus the polka-dotted bowtie. Draped over his arm was a black winter cloak. By the speculative way in which he regarded her, Hermione feared he had come bearing bad news. And when he spoke, the news he shared was not bad, to be sure, but it certainly did not feel good to hear it.

“We’re going out.”

She could tell by the look on his face that he knew the weight these words carried for her — and, by his tone of voice, that today, he was simply tired.

“To Diagon Alley,” he said. “I must make a visit to Gringotts Bank, and you, darling … you must be seen.”

Hermione returned her quill to the inkwell on her desk. Her chest felt terribly tight.

“Right,” she said, avoiding his gaze. “When are we leaving?”

“As soon as you are ready.”

If this were honestly the case, he would have been waiting for a very long time. Even once she had her cloak and boots on, Hermione did not feel even remotely ready. A strong part of her wished to request a dose of the Draught of Peace, which might make the whole affair easier. She was grateful that Tavaris did not offer it; had he done, she would not have been able to turn it down.

Diagon Alley had no guestlist, and for this reason alone, it was a much more public place than any other she had been to in the last three years. Anyone could be there, and she was not ready for all the possibilities of whom.

*

It was a Saturday afternoon, and the Leaky Cauldron was brimming with people; they were huddled round the worn oak tables with tankards of butterbeer or glasses of port, puffing on pipes in the hazy corner booths, and taking their snowflake-dusted hats off at the sticky bar top, the warmth of the dark, shabby pub a blessed reprieve from the frigid air outside.

In the few seconds that Hermione lingered by the fireplace after following Tavaris through the Floo, she had already spotted several people she knew.

Tom, the old bald barman, was topping off Dedalus Diggle’s glass as the two of them laughed uproariously at a booming tale from Rubeus Hagrid, who stood rosy-cheeked and towering behind Diggle’s barstool. As Hagrid’s massive arms swung wide in an emphatic gesture, he swept Diggle’s purple top hat right off the counter, sending it skidding like a skipping stone over the head of a young Cornelius Fudge, who exclaimed in alarm, and straight at Augusta Longbottom at the next table over, knocking the tiny glass of sherry out of her hand.

Her companion, Griselda Marchbanks, plucked the top hat off the table and looked accusingly toward the bar.

“Dedalus Diggle!” she barked, causing Diggle to jump and nearly topple off his stool as he swivelled hurriedly to locate her. “Do you lose your head, too, after two drinks, Diggle, or is it just your hat?”

“Who’s to say his head is screwed on right any time at all!” said Augusta irritably, waving her wand to clean up the spill, and she added, glaring, “don’t think we’ve forgotten the shooting stars, Dedalus!”

Hagrid roared with laughter, meanwhile Diggle spluttered.

“Those stars were perfectly well intentioned, Augusta!”

Hermione shifted to walk behind Tavaris as they passed the group, a hard lump in her throat.

Tall snowbanks caged in the door to the small courtyard out back, making the space twice as cramped as usual. She drank in the cool, clean air and willed her nerves to settle as Tavaris reached into his pocket, took out his wand, and tapped it thrice on a single brick of the wall before them; with a slowness she must have imagined, the bricks shifted apart to create a large archway.

He offered his arm to her, and without a word, lead them through and onto the cobblestone High Street.

As the pair walked, Hermione's gaze travelled greedily down the lines of shopfronts, with their frosted windowpanes, snow-topped awnings, and old wooden signs that rattled and creaked in the wind.

Amos Diggory was stepping out of Flourish and Blotts with a thin package in one gloved hand. The last Hermione had seen him, he had been in a wheelchair, widowed and alone, living at St Oswald's Home for Old Witches and Wizards in Upper Flagley. Delphini Riddle had placed him under the Imperius Curse and posed as his niece, and no one had noticed, for no one had remained to know any better.

Now, Amos was smiling to himself, perhaps headed home to his wife and son. He and Tavaris exchanged nods as they crossed paths.

Hermione drew her hood up and looked determinedly ahead.

Gringotts Bank loomed in the distance, the imposing marble structure dominating the quaint shops that surrounded it.

"Save your questions for once we're inside the vault," Tavaris murmured without explanation, as they started up the white steps to the burnished bronze doors, flanked by a goblin in a gold and scarlet uniform who bowed to them. Funnily enough, she hadn't had many questions at all until he had said this.

Inside the small entrance hall were another set of doors flanked by goblins. These doors were silver, however, and engraved upon them were the following words, which, for Hermione, never failed to incite a small twinge of guilt:

Enter, stranger, but take heed

Of what awaits the sin of greed

For those who take, but do not earn,

Must pay most dearly in their turn.

So if you seek beneath our floors

A treasure that was never yours,

Thief, you have been warned, beware

Of finding more than treasure there.

She never had regained the trust of the goblins of Gringotts Bank. Even decades after the second wizarding war had ended, they had kept an extremely close eye on her whenever she had entered the bank. More than a few times, she had spotted a few of them whispering as she passed, their gazes fixed on her.

In 1982, however, and as Lady Mione Nott, when she entered the vast marble hall, not one goblin stationed behind the long counters looked up to do more than merely take note of her before returning to their work.

Tavaris strode up to the second-nearest available bank teller.

"Afternoon, Ricbert," he said in a monotone voice, unhooking his arm from Hermione's to take out his wand and two large gold keys.

"Good day, Lord Nott."

Like the other goblins, Ricbert was not much bigger than a house-elf and possessed a rather dome-shaped head, skin with scarcely any pigment, and long fingers that he wrapped carefully around Tavaris' wand when he picked it up. He inspected it with dark, slanted eyes that had no whites in them, and with which it was made an even greater challenge to ever decipher what a goblin might be thinking.

No other words were exchanged before Ricbert was calling over another goblin to escort them, which Hermione thought quite abnormal, though perhaps this was due in part to Ricbert's efficiency; he would be Chief Bank Teller in a decade's time.

It was Ragnok, a younger, clever-faced goblin — and a future associate of Bill Weasley's — who led Hermione and Tavaris from the hall and into a narrow stone passageway lit by torches.

With a short whistle, Ragnok summoned a cart, which came rattling up the tracks of the sloping path toward them. Hermione climbed in first, then Ragnok, and then they both pretended not to notice Tavaris' grimacing as he manoeuvred his bad leg inside. Finally, the cart took off.

It often seemed they had minds of their own, these carts — turning left, then right, then left twice more through the twisting underground maze without being steered. For some reason, no one had once uttered the vault numbers. Hermione was about to ask — surely, Ragnok (and, she supposed, the cart) would need to know where they were going — but recalled what Tavaris had said about saving her questions.

Deeper into the maze they plunged, cold air rushing past and stinging her eyes. As much as he disliked boarding it, Tavaris seemed to enjoy the ride; he kept pointing things out with the air of a curious child, such as a passageway blocked by several rings of fire floating in a formation reminiscent of the logo for the Olympics, as well as an underground lake with huge stalactites and stalagmites that sprouted from both ceiling and floor like the jaws of a massive, razor-toothed beast.

Just as Hermione began to fear their route would bring them to the Fool's Downfall, the cart turned sharply a final time and jerked to an abrupt halt. Once out, Ragnok lead the way down yet another passageway, round two corners, and at last, to a dead-end.

Hermione had no questions about this, for she knew how much the Notts liked their blank walls. She stood back and watched Tavaris draw the tip of his wand across his palm, making a small cut, and wipe his bleeding hand across the stone. As he healed himself, there was a peculiar *clicking* and *clanking*, like the churning of old gears, and what looked like an iron combination lock punched out of the wall; he adjusted the numbered dials to *8 – 1 – 2*, and with a little more *clicking* and *clanking*, a door materialised.

From here, it was merely a matter of sticking the correct key in the keyhole.

Ragnok posted himself against the adjacent wall to wait and, with rising curiosity, Hermione followed Tavaris into the vault.

She expected to find, among the gold coins, towering stacks of dusty tombs, perhaps gleaming gold goblets and plates like those which had filled the Lestrange family vault, and which had, with a single touch, Multiplied and scorched her, Ron's, and Harry's skin, burned even through their clothes.

This was not that.

The interior of the vault possessed the bewildering appearance of the underground office of a shady and disorganised solicitor. Waving his wand, Tavaris lit all at once several gas lamps that perched haphazardly on stacked trunks, small spindly tables, spare shelf space, and a big oak desk. Along the back wall was a row of filing cabinets that stretched from the floor to the low stone ceiling; propped up against them was a ladder with which to reach the topmost drawers.

"This is — officially speaking — my personal vault," Tavaris told her once the door had sealed behind them. "The Nott family vault is slightly further down, protected by other means. It does share at least one security feature, though — we cannot speak the vault number whilst outside the vault."

"This is vault number eight-hundred-and-twelve," Hermione surmised, looking around. On her right sat a violet trunk, which was monogrammed; in silver lettering, it read: *P. Parkinson*.

"Indeed," said Tavaris, winding his way through the clutter toward the desk. "I opened it shortly after graduating from Hogwarts." He sat down, propped up his walking-stick, and removed his leather gloves.

Atop the trunk was a scroll of parchment pressed nearly flat by the stacks of gold coins on top of it; she spotted the surname *Abbott* printed on it. It was the deed to a house.

"Whose vault is this really, Tavaris?" she asked quietly.

"Why, darling, it is mine, of course," said Tavaris, with such mock offense it was clear he wasn't even trying to lie.

"Whose money are you keeping here, then?" Hermione asked more heatedly. "Because I highly suspect it isn't yours."

"Well, let's see …" With a long sigh, he flipped open a large ledger and began squinting at its contents. "Rosier … Avery … Rosier … Mulciber … I regret not alphabetising this … Oh, but there's Great-Uncle Wilfred, I remember that —"

"For heaven's sake, Tavaris, *whose money is this*?"

Tavaris huffed another sigh and looked up at her.

"You've seen those advertisements, I'm sure, usually for some half-cooked potion or Squib-friendly cleaning product, where it'll have printed on it something along the lines of, 'Satisfaction Guaranteed — Or Your Money Back!'" He had smiled in delivering this line, like an overenthusiastic salesman, but his smile now dropped. "Satisfaction was not met," he said, "and now they are asking for their money back."

The vault appeared inexplicably fuller than it had before.

"This was funding for the Dark Lord," said Hermione.

"Yes, darling," said Tavaris softly. "It was."

He dug a folded square of paper out of his pocket and set it on the desk. He nodded to it, then returned his tired gaze to the ledger. She came closer to take the paper — a bit of stationary with the Nott crest on the back — and unfolded it to find a list of names.

"I take it these are the unsatisfied customers?" she asked, scanning the list. The sheer length of it chilled her. All these people had made donations toward the Dark Lord's reign of terror, and of their own free will, seeing as they were bold enough to now request recompense.

Most of the names she could have predicted, but not all.

"Borgin?" she inquired, taken aback. "How on earth did you manage to swindle so much as a Knut out of that wizard?"

"Charm," replied Tavaris. At her look, he added, "Not mine."

"What happens if their money has already been spent? It would've been, would it not?" She glanced about the vault again, still so full. "Perhaps a sizable portion of it, at least."

“Then the balance shall be paid with the gold of those who are no longer here to miss it. Now,” Tavaris said, heaving himself to his feet, “you shall sit here and go through the list, find what is *owed*, while I put the amounts together. There should be some scrap parchment in one of the drawers for your calculations.”

Hermione’s breathe had become unsteady, her inhales too short and her exhales too quivering. She lowered herself slowly to sit at the desk and gazed down at the ledger.

Marked at the top of the current page in precise calligraphy was the year *1945*. Below, she recognised Tavaris’ sharp, lazy scrawl.

Creighton Rosier … 600 Galleons, paid in coin, 7.21.

Atticus Avery … 500 Galleons, paid in coin, 8.16.

Vinda Rosier … 1 000 Galleons, paid by cheque, 8.17.

The very first funding ever obtained for the Dark Lord.

In 1945, he would have just graduated from Hogwarts and still been known by the majority as Tom Riddle — an extraordinary young wizard who was wasting his potential by turning down more prestigious job offers to work at Borgin and Burkes in Knockturn Alley. When Tavaris had recorded these donations, Tom Riddle had probably already been in the process of befriending the lonely Hephzibah Smith in his effort to obtain Salazar Slytherin’s Locket and the Cup of Helga Hufflepuff, which he would later defile by making into Horcruxes.

Hermione rummaged through the drawers of the desk until she found the scrap parchment and plucked an eager-feather quill from an inkwell on the desk. Creighton Rosier was on the list of those who wanted a refund, so she wrote *Rosier* and underlined it, then began to tally the sums.

One day, she told herself, she was going to bottle this memory for Harry. With this thought in mind, she spent an ample amount of time on each page of the ledger before turning it, so every name could be read once more over her shoulder.

Tavaris was putting the sums, as she read them out, into small burlap sacks, on which he cast Undetectable Extension Charms. Most people on the list wanted not only their own money back but that of their whole family; by 1960, the Rosiers had paid a total of 15 500 Galleons, all of which went into a sack for Creighton.

The number of donations made per year grew with time, and the more pages Hermione turned, the more names she found.

Paulus Parkinson … 10 000 Galleons, paid by cheque, 5.23.

The chill that had gathered in her chest expanded to the rest of her body, causing goosebumps to break out over her skin.

Paulus was the grandfather of Pansy Parkinson, and would be the great-grandfather of Helena Nott, Hermione's own granddaughter. Hermione had known him to have been a benefactor ever since the celebration of Theodore's birth, but this fact struck her now in a way it had not then.

Like many of his fellow seat-holders, Paulus Parkinson had always been curt with Hermione when she had made appearances in the Wizengamot. She recalled him opening the door for her once — how passive-aggressive it had been, accompanied by a snide look and a mocking bow.

He had considered ten-thousand Galleons a reasonable wager for the chance to see people like her wiped from the world.

Her eyes prickled hotly at the corners. She turned the page.

Cygnus Black had thought the potential of her death and the death of her fellow Muggle-borns worth five-and-a-half-thousand, and he had thought so on two separate occasions. Meanwhile, Beldon Yaxley had signed over five-hundred acres of land in Wales, where those deaths could be planned and perhaps carried out.

"D—do the Yaxleys want their land returned as well?" she asked Tavaris, her voice shaking slightly.

Tavaris had his wand raised and was watching a line of gold coins bob through the air to drop one by one into the sack at his feet.

"My mother was a Yaxley," he said, shaking his head. "The deed was made out to look as though I'd inherited it in her stead."

Hermione nodded and swiped her knuckles hastily under her eyes, blinking quickly. She took a deep breath and continued.

Soon, she came across the contents of Bellatrix's dowry: twenty-thousand Galleons, a house in Mayfair, and a house-elf — Rascal, who Hermione guessed must have served the Dark Lord in much the same capacity Goppy had done.

Bellatrix's was not the only dowry to have been turned over to the Dark Lord upon marriage to one of his followers. There were also those of her sister Narcissa, Sophronia Travers, Loretta Yaxley, Euphemia Rowle, Aurelia Parkinson, Fiona Selwyn, and from the generation before them, Ena Rosier, Rohesia Selwyn, the late Esther Avery, and Iphigenia Mulciber, who might have been the late wife of Geoffrey Mulciber.

It would seem this was one way in which these witches were able to contribute to the cause, or perhaps prove themselves as faithful as their new husbands. Maybe not all of them were

aware, though, or else without say in the matter of their own money; Bedelia's name was in the ledger, too.

The biggest surprise to Hermione, in the hours that she and Tavaris worked to complete this task and poor Ragnok was made to wait, was coming across the name *Caspar Crouch* under 1971.

"Caspar Crouch," she said, looking up in confusion. "Is that not Barty Sr's —?"

"Father?" Tavaris finished, raising an eyebrow. "I don't believe he knew just what his gold was going toward, not then. He now wills himself to forget he ever paid it, so as to live with a clear conscience."

"Which would explain why he didn't tell his son about you," said Hermione, frowning deeply. She sat back, her mind reeling. "Why *no one* in this ledger did. If the Auror Office ever obtained access to this vault … It wouldn't matter whether they were already bound for Azkaban or not, the amount they or their families would have to pay in restitution if anyone knew … That would surely be motivation enough to keep their mouths shut about you."

She looked back down at the ledger.

"I'm going to find Igor Karkaroff in here, aren't I?"

"And a good thing that you will," said Tavaris, in an ugly voice, "seeing as he has revealed himself to have a tongue so loose it's practically begging to be yanked out."

The next coins that he Summoned hurtled across the vault like a swarm of vengeful hornets who'd had their nest disturbed and poured loudly altogether into one of the sacks.

"I have it arranged so that upon either my death or imprisonment, to avoid the Auror Office temporarily seizing the contents of my will for investigation, this vault will be sealed until Theodore comes of age, at which point he will inherit it. Theomund, as next in line, would have had the power to unseal it, of course, should it had ever happened that …" Tavaris fell silent. After a moment, he cleared his throat and said, "Should it have ever happened that the Dark Lord still required access and Theodore was not old enough to grant it."

"But —" Hermione cut herself off, swallowing thickly.

In June of 1996, Tavaris would indeed be imprisoned, and Theodore would come of age little more than four months later, whilst Tavaris remained in Azkaban. Had Theodore granted the Dark Lord that access? The Dark Lord would have certainly required it, necessary as funding was for any war.

At the back of her mind, Hermione had always known that the Dark Lord would exist in Theodore's life once more, perhaps similarly to how he would exist in the life of Draco Malfoy. But what she had not known was that the Dark Lord would have real need of him. And Theodore, she feared, though never a Death Eater himself, would see to those needs. He would be of great importance, as Tavaris' son — worse, as her own.

And when Tavaris would return to Azkaban for good, Theodore would still have ownership of this vault, and he would not report it to the Auror Office.

Why?

Was it Hermione's fault that he would maintain this silence? For telling him, in this time when he was so young and impressionable, that they must? Maybe this was the reason that, at forty-one years old, when he would be interrogated about his Time-Turner prototype, he would tell Harry absolutely nothing.

Theodore was just two years old now, and already, it had been ingrained in his brain to keep his mouth shut in the presence of those who wore maroon.

She glanced back at the list of names and wondered if they would eventually go to Theodore, too, for a refund. If so, he would keep quiet about that as well. With a trembling breath, she turned over the list to look at the crest on the back; just beneath it was the motto of House Nott:

Potentia 'i Silencio.

Her blood may have run through his veins, but Theodore would not know the truth of what that meant. To him, he would be, first and foremost, a Nott.

Just how seriously would he grow to take that legacy?

Some indeterminable amount of time later, Hermione exited Vault 812 with a gross feeling on her skin and a nauseous churning in her stomach. Tavaris had in his hand a single small sack which contained — though it did not appear to — over a dozen others, all filled with varying amounts of gold, and a few, the deeds to properties scattered across the United Kingdom.

Ragnok was understandably peeved; the tone with which he received Hermione's apology for the wait was snide, even if his words remained polite. Grumbling indistinctly in Gobbledegook under his breath, he led them back to the cart, and from there, deeper underground, to the Nott family vault.

Once more, Hermione held back her questions, regardless of her biting curiosity. She predicted a dragon to be among the protections of this vault, recalling the Ukrainian Ironbelly that had at one point guarded the Lestranges'. Although twice on the journey she caught a glimpse of dragon fire coming out of the spidery web of tunnels, her prediction ultimately proved incorrect.

After all, it was not brute strength or profound magical power that the Notts valued most; it was something with the potential to be far more dangerous: knowledge — and in some cases, a lack thereof.

The three of them climbed out of the cart and wound down another dimly-lit passageway. The air here was cold and damp; nearby, water dripped, the noise like a leaking faucet. Upon rounding the final twist, Tavaris threw his arm out to halt her. She looked up at him bemusedly, but he shook his head and signalled for her to stay silent.

From somewhere ahead of them came the echo of four massive paws padding along the stone, growing closer with every second.

Hermione's heart quickened with fear. She glanced back to find Ragnok had stopped several paces behind them and seemingly had no intention of going further. Dread filled her.

At last, the creature emerged from the shadows at the end of the passage; it was not a dragon, but the great slinking figure of an overlarge lion, with the head of a woman. Once upon them, her clever, almond-shaped eyes did not waver. The brown tuft at the tip of her long, yellowish tail swept through the air as she began to pace, effectively blocking the way forward.

Hermione sagged with relief. It was merely a sphinx.

"You have not come alone," the sphinx said, in a deep, hoarse voice. She was looking only at Tavaris now.

"I have not," he replied. "My wife is accompanying me today."

The sphinx's gaze fell upon Hermione.

"You may not pass unless you can answer my riddle," the sphinx explained, continuing to pace. "Answer on your first guess — I let you pass. Answer wrongly — I attack. Remain silent — I let you walk away from me, unscathed."

Hermione nodded readily.

"Let us hear it," said Tavaris, with dwindling patience.

The sphinx stopped at the centre of the path and sat back on her hind legs, then recited:

"Within the shadows it creeps,

Or so one might believe,

But if it must hide it is poor at what it does,

For the best even the like-minded cannot see.

It is here for all time but gone after you reach your bed

And long before the chicken's egg is set to hatch.

Consider it warning or council, still you must heed,

Though useless it will be if you do not today proceed:

It lives with you, beside you and in you,

Should true you not be."

Tavaris hummed.

“For the best even the like-minded cannot see …” he murmured thoughtfully to himself. “This is a good one.”

Hermione put her back to him to avoid distraction.

This thing, whatever it was, did not hide in the shadows, not unless it was insufficiently skilled at its job. So the best of its kind stayed in plain sight? And it could go unnoticed by its peers? She folded her arms and furrowed her brow, thinking hard.

Here for all time but gone after you reach your bed ... What did one do upon reaching bed? *Lay down, obviously,* she thought. Her eyes widened. *Lay, as in a chicken laying an egg!*

“Which happens *before* it hatches,” she muttered, her mind accelerating. “But what has that got to do with …” She trailed off, pursing her lips.

What lived with her? Hermione tried not to think too literally, but it was difficult when the thing that lived with her was, in fact, also currently beside her. But in her? She shuddered.

Focus, Hermione. Her shoulders had risen up by her ears.

“What was the last line?” asked Tavaris, the frown evident in his voice.

“Should true you not be,” repeated the sphinx mysteriously. In her voice, Hermione sensed a smile.

It only lives with you if you aren’t true ... True to yourself? Hermione supposed telling someone to be true to themselves would indeed be slightly redundant if they were about to be mauled by a sphinx rather than proceed past one. She was not exactly true to herself — at least, she was lying about her true self, to everyone, including her fellow liar beside her.

Hermione gasped.

“*Oh*! Of course! *Lie*, not *lay*!” she exclaimed. She whirled round to face the sphinx. “The answer is a liar.”

The sphinx smiled at her. With a gracious bow of her head, she stepped aside to let them pass.

Hermione beamed. She, Tavaris, and Ragnok proceeded down the passageway together.

“I’ve always wanted to do that!” she whispered excitedly.

“And you did exceptionally well, darling,” said Tavaris, “as I knew you would.”

So well, she had beaten him to the correct answer. She hoped it hurt his pride.

This time, to enter the vault, Ragnok had to press his whole hand against a series of interwoven locks, which unravelled and slunk back like a pit of snakes dispersing. As the large door cracked open, black smoke blew out into their faces, cloaking all that lay within.

Tavaris grabbed Hermione swiftly by the arm and led her inside. The door shut with a slight *bang* behind them before Ragnok could so much as glimpse the interior of the vault.

Now this was what Hermione had expected.

There might have actually been more books than there were coins. Gold bars, silver dishware, glittering jewels and shining swords, ancient vases, intricate tapestries and rugs, mahogany furniture, portraits in gleaming gilded frames — the Nott fortune laid about higgledy-piggledy in a labyrinth of tomes upon tomes, all layered in dust and a few of them so big that Theodore could quite literally become lost in their pages.

In a daze, Hermione wandered deeper into the vault.

“Quite a collection, isn’t it?” said Tavaris, sounding pleased.

She nodded dumbly.

Stacked atop one of the largest tomes at the foot of a suit of armour was an old book so ornate, it was perhaps the most beautiful she had ever seen. On the front was a triangle with a line through it and a circle in the centre — the symbol of the Deathly Hallows. She wondered if it had been the obsession of a past Nott.

“Be careful with that one,” said Tavaris, spotting where her attention had gone. “It is the memoir of Cadmus Peverell. He wrote it just before he took his life. You know *The Tale of the Three Brothers*, but are you familiar with the theories behind it?”

“Quite,” said Hermione shortly.

“Well — oh —” she glanced up to find him distracted by another stack of books, “— you will appreciate this.”

It was the complete works of William Shakespeare. Tavaris scooped up a bunch of gold coins that had been on top of it and dumped them unceremoniously into a blue velvet pouch. Then, gently, he opened the topmost book. The publication date within revealed it to be from the year 1623.

Hermione sucked in a big breath.

“A f—first edition. How —?”

A throat was cleared nearby. Her head jerked up.

Propped up against the closest wall was the portrait of an especially sour-looking witch.

“Ah. Good day, Eldride.”

“Is it?” said the witch coolly. “I would not know. I have not been above ground myself in … Why, I do not know that, either.”

Tavaris gave a tight-lipped smile.

“Darling, meet my great-grandmother, Lady Eldride Nott.”

Eldride harrumphed.

“Well, I believe we have everything we require —”

“Take me with you!” another portrait burst out, this one of a white-haired wizard with a monocle. “Put me in my laboratory! I can be of use!”

A dozen other portraits piped up from all about the vault.

“If he gets to go, so should I!”

“Do not abandon me here with these fools!”

“Eawynn snores!”

There was a shriek of affront. “Blasphemy!”

Tavaris shoved the pouch of coins into his pocket and hastened Hermione out of the vault.

It was only a small relief to emerge from the bank a short while later. Hermione would have gladly stayed in the last vault for hours, regardless of its noisy occupants. Underground, she did not feel the need to look over her shoulder.

A bitterly cold dusk had rolled in, the wind picking up. She and Tavaris marched silently up the nearly vacated High Street toward the Leaky Cauldron.

“We have one last stop before we return home,” Tavaris said when they reached the small courtyard. He looked down at her, his expression inscrutable. “One drink.”

Hermione felt herself pale. She began shaking her head.

“No — no, Tavaris —”

He opened the door, and she quickly clamped her mouth shut. He nodded inside. Reluctantly, she entered the busy pub.

One of the booths at the very back had opened. Tavaris directed her to it before going to the bar to order. When he returned with two glasses of cider, he slid in after her, effectively caging her in. In truth, she was grateful, for this provided her cover from the rest of the pub. He tucked his walking-stick away behind them on the bench.

“You have done this before,” he reminded her, sliding over her drink. “You are capable of doing it again.”

He was right; she was supposed to have been in Diagon Alley just a few months ago. Hermione searched hurriedly for a lie.

"I was half-delirious with fever when I came here," she whispered in explanation, mindful of who could be listening. "I wasn't so aware of all the people."

Assuming they were meant to be there a while, Hermione decided to distract herself by doing the crossword from a copy of the *Prophet* that had been forgotten in the booth, using a slightly bent quill Tavaris kept in his cloak pocket. But the crossword proved too easy; it did not occupy her mind. She stared hard at the clue for twenty-three down — *A lion, goat, and dragon in one* — and tried, to no avail, to drown out the sound of Hagrid's booming voice from the other end of the pub. He was telling the story of how the current Hogwarts Care of Magical Creatures professor had lost his latest limb.

"… not known fer their friendliness, chimaeras, are they? Took the hand clean off! O' course, Dumbledore reckoned it'd not go well, an' he told Silvanus so, but this bloke was lookin' to do a portrait an' Silvanus reckoned some groomin' was in order …"

Without satisfaction, Hermione filled in the boxes: *CHIMAERA*. On thirty-one across, however, she drew a blank: *Author — Cassandra*.

"Tavaris, who wrote *Unfogging the Future*?" she asked. "Cassandra what? I know it begins with a V but —" She looked up.

Tavaris appeared lost in thought. She had to say his name twice before he heard it. Even then, she was uncertain that he truly had.

"A Four-Point Spell," he said, quite randomly.

Her throat constricted briefly.

"What about it?"

"It enables the rotation," he muttered distractedly, reaching inside his robes and taking out a journal that was bound, she realised in slight disgust, with dragonhide. He flipped speedily through the pages of sharp, lazy scrawl before settling on one which was occupied largely by a diagram of the human eye.

He stole the quill from her, and in the bottom-left corner, he circled the word *rotation* and scribbled beneath it, *Four-Point: compass led by thought; lens points N*.

Hermione's jaw dropped. She scanned the page with mounting incredulity, her eyes leaping from each disordered note to the next.

protection —> Imperturbable & Impervius

animation —> Piertotum Locomotor

counters Disillusionment & Invisibility? detects past Obliteration?

Supersensory Charm

disconnected optic nerve, yet images relayed… Legilimency?

fastened with Fixing Charm; Sticking too temporary, Permanent prohibits repair/alteration — but rotation prohibits fastening… deviation of Gripping Charm, unfastened yet held? or Repelling, prevented escape from socket?

"For heaven's sake, Tavaris!" she hissed quietly. "You've been conducting research on *Moody's eye*?"

"I would have to somehow *obtain* it in order to sufficiently *research* it," Tavaris murmured sourly out of the corner of his mouth. "These are merely hypotheses. That it is Bewitched is a given — but what of its other properties? Do you suppose Scarpin's Revelaspell is among them?" he added abruptly. He seemed very concerned about this possibility.

"No," said Hermione, very concerned that he was. "I highly doubt that his eye has the power to identify the ingredients of a potion at first glance."

He gave a short hum and nodded to himself.

"What about *Specialis Revelio*?"

"Tavaris — this is mad."

"Now, really, darling," Tavaris said, his tone patronising, "you cannot honestly tell me that you are not the least bit curious yourself. I have no doubt you've already developed a few theories of your own."

He gave her a knowing look and slid the journal over to rest between them. He extended the quill to her.

"Go on. I know you want to."

She glared at him for a moment, then, huffing in annoyance, took the quill. Recalling the bowler cap that Moody had worn out into the Muggle world, and the time that he had lifted it to flash his eye at the Dursley family in the attempt to frighten them into being nicer to Harry, her first move was to cross out, *Muggle-Repelling?*

"Fewer wizards account for the risk of alarming Muggles than you may think," she said. "Besides, any spells to repel them would impede his work; he can hardly question a Muggle witness if they suddenly recall they're late for a dentist appointment the second they get near him."

"*Den-tist*?"

Hermione swallowed painfully.

“Muggle teeth Healers.”

With haste, she refocused her attention on the page, determined not to follow that train of thought. She frowned at the diagram, where, in brackets beneath the labelled iris, Tavaris had written, *piercing blue — why?*

“I consider it more of an electric blue myself,” she admitted, still speaking in a careful undertone. “I know this doesn’t quite make sense — and besides, for all I know, the colour could be completely unrelated to the charmwork — but I’d wondered if … well … if perhaps the shade is related to the electrical impulses that the optic nerve delivers to the brain. This is very likely a product of word association, though,” she added quickly.

“Electrical impulses?” he inquired.

“It’s what the retina converts light to so that it can be transmitted to the brain and thereby converted to visual images.”

“Mm. Action potential.” He nodded to the page, picking up his cider. “Write it down.”

She did, squeezing her note between the unorderly lines which evidenced the clear disorganisation of Tavaris’ brain.

“The main issue I have found is how that action potential can manage to reach the brain in the first place,” he continued, “seeing as the optic nerve must be detached to facilitate the level of rotatability his eye seems to possess. I saw the iris disappear entirely at one point, you know.” He took another sip of cider, a furrow at his brow. “Do you believe he can see out of the back of his head?”

“Definitely,” said Hermione emphatically, reaching for her own cider with her free hand. “I believe the eye provides what is essentially X-ray vision.”

“Let me guess, *another* Muggle term?”

She lowered the glass, rolling her eyes. “He can see through his skull, I mean,” she said, exasperated, “as well as probably about a dozen additional layers that would normally be occluding — all of which he must be able to choose whether to surpass or not; otherwise, he’d only ever see to the furthest potential point.”

She peered out at the rest of the pub as she raised the glass to her lips again, and promptly stilled.

“But what *is* the furthest potential point? We cannot be certain of the limitations — or if there are any limitations at all, for that matter.” At her silence, Tavaris paused, presumably following her gaze. His voice dropped several octaves lower. “Is that who I think it is?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

He shut the journal.

“Very well. Call him over, then.”

Hermione shot him a startled look.

“It has been years, has it not?” said Tavaris, raising an eyebrow. “Mustn’t you miss your very dear friend?”

“Tavaris …” she began warily, but he spoke again before she could think of anything more to say.

“You know what to do. This is no different than Black and McKinnon.”

But it was.

Tavaris was already rising from his seat to let her out of the booth. She took a deep breath, mustering up the courage, and slid out after him. Her smile was shaky at best; however, she did manage one, and she even managed to sound excited, too, when she took off across the pub, crying out, “Remus!”

It was scarcely three steps from the entrance on Charing Cross Road that Remus stood, motionless, as though the sight he had met upon entering the pub had stopped him in his tracks.

Hermione threw her arms around his neck before he could properly react. Into his ear, she whispered, “Please forgive for this.”

Several long seconds passed before his arms lifted to hug her back — slowly, uncertain. When she released him and stepped back, the last traces of shock were clearing, replaced by an expression of grim understanding. He cast his gaze out over her head at the bustling pub behind her, and she knew he was looking at Tavaris — just as she knew Tavaris was looking right back.

“How are you?” she asked, searching his face. “How have you been holding up?”

Remus lowered his gaze back to her.

“I’m well,” he said.

Although he did not look as poorly as he had back in November, Hermione doubted he was telling the truth. He had cleaned himself up today, at least, clean-shaven and with a fresh haircut — but then again, his hair did look as though it had been cut with a pair of kitchen scissors by someone blind drunk.

Meaningfully, he added, “And yourself?”

“As well as I can be, I suppose,” Hermione said uncomfortably, wringing her hands to keep from reaching out and fixing his collar, which was crooked. “I — er — I’m here with — with my husband, actually. He’d really like to meet you, if you’re not in a hurry to be anywhere — but, of course, if you *are* in a hurry to be somewhere then I wouldn’t dream of delaying —”

“I’m meeting my father for dinner,” Remus interrupted, for which she was thankful. “It was his birthday this week so …” His eyes darted over her head again. “But I don’t believe he’s here yet …”

Just then, a loud, cheery voice sounded behind Hermione.

“Well, hello, Lupin!”

The next moment, she found herself swamped by Hagrid’s shadow as he extended one massive hand to shake both of Remus’.

“How are you, Hagrid?” Remus asked, with a strained smile.

“Oh, can’t complain, I *cannot* complain — but me, I’m lucky,” said Hagrid, suddenly solemn, “an’ I’ll not soon forget it.” He studied Remus keenly through squinting, black-beetle eyes. “How’ve you been holdin’ up? Yeh haven’ happened ter have heard from that friend of yers, have yeh?”

Remus swallowed thickly. He glanced at Hermione, who bowed her head to prevent Hagrid from seeing her face. She had avoided him at Hogwarts for this precise reason; Hagrid was quite notably horrendous at keeping secrets, and he knew her better than almost anyone in this time. He would know her face — maybe not now, but one day.

“I have, as a matter of fact,” said Remus, after a second. “She tells me she’s well.”

“Yeh reckon she’s tellin’ the truth?” Hagrid asked him, in what he probably thought was a hushed voice.

“I hope so,” said Remus heavily. “Now, I’m terribly sorry, Hagrid, but if you’ll excuse me,” he added, slightly awkward, “I’m actually meeting someone —”

“Right! Right, o’ course!” said Hagrid, shuffling ungracefully out of the way. Hermione slipped behind him before she got accidentally barrelled over. “Good ter see yeh, Lupin. You look after yerself now.”

“You as well, Hagrid.”

Once they had both succeeded in making it past him, Hermione took Remus’ arm and steered him away from the bar. It took tremendous effort to go on speaking.

“You can sit with us while you wait for your father. Tavaris, he’s really — I mean, he’d like to put a face to the name, you know,” she rambled, forcing herself to keep smiling, “he’s heard so much about you over the years, and, well, I’d like for you to meet him as well, not to mention I do very much want to hear how you’ve been and …” She trailed off, for they had too soon reached the booth.

Tavaris did not rise to greet them, though he had taken the initiative to fix his face into something remotely cordial.

“So *you* are the Remus Lupin I have heard so much about,” he said. His eyes glittered with curiosity. “It is always nice to be able to put a face to the name.”

Remus stood up straighter.

“I would shake your hand,” Tavaris went on, his voice light and airy, “but, you see, mine have just been wiped clean.”

Hermione’s smile dropped. She gaped at him in disbelief.

“For the love of — *that isn’t a joking matter, Tavaris*!”

“Come now, it was a little funny, wasn’t it? Lupin?”

“Hilarious,” said Remus flatly.

“See, darling? If we cannot laugh, we have nothing left.”

“That may be true,” said Hermione hotly, “but even so, that remains a distinctly unfunny situation.”

Tavaris sighed as though hard done by. He made room for Hermione beside him and gestured to the empty bench opposite.

“Join us, Lupin. I insist.”

With a glance at Hermione, Remus slid slowly into the booth. His eyes flitted between her and Tavaris. He was probably thinking that they were sitting too close — that she ought to seem more repulsed or afraid by the arm draped behind her. Perhaps he was right.

She leaned forward and folded her arms atop the table, trying to ignore the fact that her face was burning with shame.

“So, tell me — oh, everything, I suppose.” She didn’t know what to say. “It’s only that … well … I’ve worried, after everything that’s happened … It really has been so long …”

“It has,” Remus agreed, playing along, however reluctantly. His shoulders were extremely tense. “A great deal has changed. I mean, you have a son now, for a start. He’d be — what — just over two years old now, is that right?”

Tavaris became tense himself, but Hermione only smiled. She knew what question Remus was truly getting at here, and for once, she had a positive answer to give him.

“Yes, that’s right,” she said. “Theodore.”

“How is he?” he asked, looking at her intently.

“He’s well, thank you,” Tavaris answered, curt.

“He’s working on his ABCs at the moment,” said Hermione significantly. “We’ve been singing the alphabet song while we brush our teeth — though this method has, of course, resulted in more than one pair of toothpaste-stained pyjamas.”

“I can imagine,” said Remus, and just fleetingly, he returned her smile. “I’m glad he’s doing well.”

Tavaris gave a short hum. He patted Hermione on the knee; the second his hand dipped beneath the table, Remus stiffened further.

“Why don’t you fetch your friend a drink, darling — and while you’re at it, a firewhiskey for me. Here —” He retrieved the velvet pouch from his pocket, dug out a few silver Sickles, and placed them in the palm of her hand.

“Right.” Hermione nodded to herself and, with reluctance, stood. “I’ll — er — be back in a moment, then.”

She squeezed past Cornelius Fudge’s chair, forced herself not to speed up when she went by Augusta Longbottom and Griselda Marchbanks’ table, and found a spot at the bar as far from Hagrid and Diggle as possible. While she waited for Tom to finish serving a windswept witch a tankard of Paulopabita’s Fishy Green Ale, she kept an eye on the booth, trying to read Tavaris’ lips.

To her alarm, he was taking out his chequebook.

She sensed someone fill the space on her left.

“Lady Nott. I did not expect to see *you* here.”

Hermione tore her eyes from Tavaris and Remus to find herself confronted with the pale, bull-like face of Paulus Parkinson. His greying black hair was tied back with a leather thong, slick and receding at the front. Sweet-smelling smoke emitted from the tumbler grasped in one of his thick hands.

“I say, this is quite the coincidence; my wife and I were speaking of you just the other night,” Parkinson informed her, as more smoke trickled from the lit pipe in his other hand. “She bemoans the fact that you continue to decline the invitation to join the Ladies’ Tea Society.”

Hermione was momentarily confounded by his geniality. The Dark Lord was gone; one would assume his followers would give the boot-licking a rest. What did they think they still had to gain?

“I try constantly to explain to her that you are far above such female frivolity,” Parkinson went on, so patronisingly that Hermione actually had the urge to defend the witches of the Ladies’ Tea Society, “but she and our daughter-in-law nevertheless go on mourning the loss of your potential company. Preciosa is little better, I am afraid.”

He chuckled, shaking his head in exasperation over their silly female ways, and lifted his pipe to his lips.

“Do you mind?”

His brows shot up. He lowered his pipe, bemused.

“Pardon me?” he said thickly through a cloud of grey smoke.

Hermione waved it away from herself, coughing and wrinkling her nose in disgust.

“Go blow your smoke in someone else’s face, why don’t you? Preferably someone standing far, far away from me.”

Parkinson appeared taken aback.

“My apologies, Lady Nott,” he said, recovering swiftly, “I was unaware —”

“Unaware that the smoke from your pipe upsets my delicate female sensibilities?” she interrupted coldly. “Find someplace else to smoke, Mr Parkinson. I assure you I shall not mourn the loss of your company.”

“All right over here?” Tom cut in, having reached this end of the bar at last.

From the other end, Hagrid and Diggle were watching silently.

“Quite,” said Hermione tensely, her face hot. “One firewhiskey, neat, and a butterbeer, please, Tom.”

She was not about to put any sort of alcohol in Remus’ hand.

Tom gave her a nod.

“Put it on my tab,” Parkinson insisted.

Hermione scoffed and set her coins down on the counter. The moment Tom handed her the tumbler and foaming tankard, she thanked him and took off back to the booth — which was slightly fuller than how she had left it.

“Mione, you’ve met my father,” Remus said tensely, gesturing to the wizard beside him, who had light brown hair flecked with grey and a forehead so deeply lined it left no doubt that he had spent the better part of his life frowning. The shadows beneath his shrewd eyes were no less prominent than those which stained the sallow skin beneath his son’s.

“Of course, at graduation,” Hermione said, with increasing embarrassment, as she retook her seat. “It’s wonderful to see you again, Mr Lupin. And happy belated birthday.”

“Thank you, Mrs Nott,” Lyall Lupin replied perfunctorily.

“I do not believe I have mentioned, darling,” said Tavaris, as she slid the tankard of butterbeer across the table to Remus, whose eyes followed the path of Tavaris’ own drink, “but Lupin here is the one who saw the ghosts of my great-aunt and -uncle stationed at our estate after they passed.”

Mr Lupin inclined his head. “They were by far the most agreeable spirits I have encountered over the course of my career,” he said. “But I do suppose they would’ve known where they were to go even before they died, which certainly helped the process along.”

Hermione was suddenly reminded of something, and she felt guilty for having forgotten.

“I — erm — I realise I am saying this quite late,” she said, looking once more at Mr Lupin, “but you must know you have my condolences. I was deeply sorry to hear about your wife’s passing — and, Remus, your mother …” Her voice wavered. She made herself swallow. “I’m so sorry. I should have written.”

“What is done is done,” said Mr Lupin, with an air of determined finality. “But thank you. I must extend my own condolences; I read about your recent loss in the paper. A seizure, was it?” he added, glancing at Tavaris.

“Mm. Yes,” said Tavaris tightly, lifting his tumbler, “it was quite sudden and unexpected.” He took a large sip.

Hermione half-wished he would down the drink in one go, like he surely wished to do himself, so they could finally leave. With this thought in mind, she gestured for him to pass her cider.

“It has been an exceedingly long few years. A lot more than a few, really. But at least we can take solace in the fact that those years are behind us.” Mr Lupin narrowed his eyes slightly. “Wouldn’t you agree, Nott?”

Tavaris huffed a weak laugh.

“Profusely.”

Hermione followed suit. “I am … *indescribably* grateful … that my son will not have to grow up in that world.” Even as she said them, the weight of her words rested heavily on her heart.

“I doubt I could manage to sufficiently describe my gratefulness for that, either,” said Tavaris, which was fitting considering how ungrateful he truly was. With a soft expression, he tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear, then looked back at the Lupins. “Speaking of which, we best be returning home to him. It’s very nearly suppertime.”

Hermione tried not to look relieved.

“It was wonderful to see you both,” she said, already getting to her feet. She grabbed Tavaris’ walking-stick to speed up the process. “Remus … I hope to run into you again soon.”

Remus opened his mouth but paused, seeming conflicted, as his father laid a hand on his shoulder, as though he were trying to stop Remus from saying whatever he was about to say.

“Write this time,” he told her finally.

“Of course,” replied Hermione, and what a bewildering experience it was to hope, for once, that someone would see straight through her.

She needed to visit him again — and soon — to explain herself.

Mr Lupin kept his hand firmly on Remus' shoulder as she and Tavaris took their leave. Even when they reached the fireplace on the other side of the pub, and Hermione glanced back at the booth, Mr Lupin's hand stayed where it was, as if to prevent Remus from standing, from following them — from doing anything at all.

Hermione had long been under the impression that the relationship between Remus and his father was rocky at best. Yet, even if Remus managed it himself, she did not think Mr Lupin would ever forgive her for the hurt she was causing his son.

As she looked away from the pair, she spotted Augusta Longbottom watching her from afar. Once caught, Augusta's gaze still did not waver, her expression cool and calculating.

Hermione doubted she had ever felt more ashamed in her life.

She stepped gladly into the Floo.

The table in the informal dining room was being set by Dinky when she and Tavaris returned to the Nott Estate. Theodore was already sat in his seat with a rumbling stomach, which he explained, most aggrieved, was not obeying when he shushed it and needed to be quieted with food, so she and Tavaris ought to wash their hands and take their seats.

Dinner was an especially tiresome affair that night, the day too long and much too taxing. Hermione pushed her mutton about on her plate, eating little, and listened with half an ear as Tavaris described Gringotts Bank to Theodore in extraordinary detail. With the return of his speech came the return of his curiosity, and Theodore had questions aplenty.

How many vaults were in the bank? How fast did the carts go? What made them go? What did the goblins look like? Why could they not be trusted with anything but gold?

And eventually: "I go bank, too, Pa?"

To this, Tavaris did not have an immediate answer. He picked up his wine goblet, hesitated, and shook his head.

"There are no children allowed in the bank, Theodore," Hermione lied. "One day, when you're older, you will go."

And at least that last part was not a lie, because when he was older, Theodore would visit Gringotts Bank, and likely frequently, each time the Dark Lord required access to his funds.

She still felt sick thinking about it.

But what was worse, much worse than anything else that had happened that day, was the fact that Hermione was not looking at her son the same way she had looked at him that morning.

*

There was something off about Pa. He was quiet, in a way he had not often been before, at least outside the month of February.

As he and Theo rode from Kings Cross Station to Nottingham Hall in the backseat of one of the Ministry of Magic's sleek, black cars, he stared out the window, blank-faced and with a tight jaw. The silence was uneasy, even when he spoke.

"Your classes were alright this year, I presume?"

"They were fine," Theo said. "Defence Against the Dark Arts was interesting, though the professor was rather unhinged."

Pa hummed.

"Yes, I suppose he must've been," he murmured, sounding adrift. "Azkaban will do that to a person … And even if it did not, he would have been unhinged, as you said, in his impersonation. There is a reason Alastor Moody is called Mad-Eye and it has little to do with his prosthetic."

The wizard driving the car glanced at Pa through the rear-view mirror, his eyes a dark green and crinkled at the corners.

Theo stuck his hand in his pocket; he turned one of Dean Thomas' paints over between his fingers — the blue paint, since it was a primary colour, thus useful, but not one of the primary colours that Thomas needed to make his banners for cheering on the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

"I think my examinations would've gone well had they not been cancelled," Theo said.

"That is good. O.W.L. year is right around the corner. It is important that you are comfortable with your knowledge of the curriculum."

After that, Pa lapsed back into silence. Wary of breaking it, Theo stared out his own window, watching the buildings shrink and then disappear, eventually replaced by green plains and roaming cows and sheep. Every so often, he looked back at Pa, wondering, and at the same time knowing, where he had been the night Cedric Diggory had died.

What would happen now, Theo had only the faintest of ideas.

When, at last, the car slowed to a stop in the shadow of Nottingham Hall, the sun was all but gone, and the driver's eyes were brown.

"You've a good rest of your evening, sonny," he told Theo, as Pa heaved himself out to fetch Theo's trunk and empty owl cage from the boot.

"You as well, sir," replied Theo, feeling off-kilter. He hesitated, wondering if he ought to inform the driver that his disguise was slipping, then decided against it and forced himself out of the car.

The driver would realise eventually. Whoever he was, it was hardly Theo's problem.

The walk up to the front doors was as quiet as the drive, except for Theo's trunk and owl cage, which Levitated behind him and Pa, occasionally bumping into one another with a *thump* and a *rattle*. The fountain was still, no water spouting from its peak, and the grass appeared duller than it should have been in June. Contributing to the strangeness, no house-elf awaited them in the entryway.

Pa's jaw tightened further.

He sent Theo's things ahead of them with a Banishing Spell and clutched his walking-stick and the railing both as they ascended the stairs; each flight seemed to add to his effort, and he paused when they reached the top, taking a moment to regain his breath.

"Pa," said Theo, and he felt the need to whisper it.

Pa only shook his head and led the way into the family apartments. He was slower on these stairs, as though to avoid running out of breath again. Theo stayed a few steps behind him.

On the landing, Pa stilled. The doors to the master parlour were open; from the room, Theo could hear the *crackling* of a fire, accompanied by a soft *clinking*, like that of an ice-filled drink when it was moved.

After a moment, Pa continued down the landing.

"Come, Theodore."

Theo followed him to the parlour on wobbly legs. When, at the threshold, Pa paused once more, so did he.

On the high-backed armchair before the fireplace awaited a wizard in sweeping robes the darkest of all blacks. His face glowed in the light of the hearth, his features almost serpentine and his skin so colourless that it appeared as if it were made from wax. In one hand, he held a bone-white wand, and in the other, a tumbler, which he swirled loosely, causing the chips of ice to knock one another into the crystal.

Theo knew who this wizard was, even before Pa bowed.

"My Lord," he said softly.

The Dark Lord's tone was cold and mocking. "Now, now, Tavaris … like you *mean it*."

With difficulty, Pa lowered himself to his knees.

"My Lord. To what do I owe the honour?"

"*Do not pretend*!" the Dark Lord snarled, jolting forward in the seat. "You know why I am here, Nott, and honour has nothing to do with it!"

Suddenly, his gaze shifted, his eyes like pools of blood. He sat back, toying with his wand.

"Theodore. My, how you have grown."

Theo held his gaze tensely, afraid to move.

“Last I saw you, you were but an infant cradled on your mother’s lap.” He tilted his head slightly, regarding Theo with fearful interest. “You look very like her … She, too, froze at the sight of my wand.”

He Summoned the footstool to his side.

“Come. Sit with me while I show you why.”

Chapter End Notes

You didn't really believe Voldemort was gone for good, did you?

A Hand to Hold

Chapter Summary

> When the road looks rough ahead
> And you're miles and miles from your nice warm bed
> You just remember what your old pal said
> Boy, you've got a friend in me
> — You've Got a Friend in Me, Randy Newman

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Through tired eyes, Hermione watched as the cool light of day inched steadily into the nursery, creeping ever closer to the armchair on which she sat curled in her nightgown. It was drizzling out, washing away the little snow that had yet to melt in the abrupt warmth that February had brought.

With a wide yawn, she set her socked feet on the carpet and stretched out her stiff legs, wincing at the sharp, shooting pain in her lower-back. A night on the armchair would do that.

Theodore slept on, holding loosely to the blue tail of his stuffed Short-Snout, but Crookshanks raised his head when Hermione stood.

"Just a moment, Crooks," she murmured, and, blearily, she tip-toed back to her bedroom to fetch her dressing gown and slippers.

In this room, only mist could be glimpsed out the window, and the drizzle could not be heard over Tavaris' snores. He lay sprawled on the bed in the same position he had been when she had climbed over him to leave roughly five hours earlier. It had been half-three when he had woken her up with his stumbling.

He had wanted someone to do a jigsaw puzzle with him.

The pieces were strewn across the floor now, and Hermione crept carefully over them: the tip of a turret here, a lone Quidditch post there — altogether, the grounds of Hogwarts Castle. It reminded her of walking through its rubble.

Within twenty minutes, Tavaris had given up his puzzling and been telling her, in little more than a sheepish whisper, that no one would make grey-hair jokes on his birthday again. As winter had begun its thawing, she had discovered that if she only ran her fingers through that greying hair, all his thoughts would come pouring out of his mouth, and with at last an empty mind, he would fall asleep. Then she could leave.

It was not every night, but it was enough of them that she slept with one eye open — when she slept.

She grabbed her dressing gown from the footboard of the bed, put on her slippers, and crept out as noiselessly as she had the first time that morning. In a whisper, she woke Theodore for breakfast. They said, "Good morning," first to each other, then to Crookshanks, then to Dinky who met them as they descended the stairs, and upon reaching the conservatory, to Billy Stubbs and Caradoc Dearborn.

"I think we ought to paint those pots," Hermione said, gazing at the pair of ferns as Dinky placed their breakfast tray on the small, white-clothed table. "Thank you, Dinky. So that we can always tell them apart. What say you, Theodore?"

Theodore nodded. She thought this would be the extent of his answer, but once he was done yawning, he said, "Fave'it colou's."

"Your favourite colours?" she guessed, reaching for the butter dish. "Should we paint them green and blue, then?"

He shook his head.

"Mr Stubbs' an' Mr Dee-bone's fave'it."

It gave Hermione pause, and it gave her further pause that it had given her any to begin with; it should not suddenly now surprise her when he said things so kind so simply.

"That's very thoughtful of you, my love," she said eventually, resuming buttering her toast. "I'm sure they would appreciate that. But I'm afraid I do not know their favourite colours."

Theodore looked incredibly disheartened by this.

Once he had his food in front of him, she began to fix herself a cup of tea. As she stirred, slowly and soundlessly, an idea came to her.

"I *do* know, however, that Mr Stubbs likes rabbits. Perhaps we should paint a rabbit on his pot."

Theodore was greatly approving of this, judging by how many times he nodded his head. As he gazed down at his porridge, though, his expression became once more downcast.

"But, Ma," he said, "Mr Dee-Bone needs a fave-it 'ing, too."

It was remarkable, the empathy he had at this age, and for what he thought was merely a houseplant. Hermione feared whatever would one day replace it with apathy.

Just then, Dinky returned with the *Prophet*. She thanked them and began scanning the front few pages, her eyes leaping from headline to headline and, for now, delving no deeper. She then flipped through to check the obituaries.

Dinky cleared their throat.

"*Mistress*," they said intently.

She glanced up. Guiltily, she realised they had not moved from her side. She noticed now that they were holding a second item: a photograph, which they laid before her on the table, directly over an obituary for an elderly witch from Yorkshire.

"What is —?" But Hermione did not finish her question, for she already knew the answer.

The photograph pictured a quaint shopfront in Diagon Alley, on a rare sunny day when the cobblestone appeared a warmer grey and the light bounced off the freshly washed windowpanes. A wooden sign hung above the shop's door, still on its hinges; in silver italics, it read: *Countering the Cursed: Antiques Made New, est. 1972*.

Someone, she suspected, had been conducting some reconnaissance when this photograph had been taken. The shop had belonged to Caradoc Dearborn.

Dinky pointed to the bright blue awning.

"*That* colour."

And so, that was what Hermione and Theodore did that morning, after brushing their teeth very, very quietly and getting dressed even quieter. Of course, when applied to the terracotta, the blue paint wound up looking more like indigo, but the rabbit turned out far better than expected considering Theodore's preference for fingerpainting and Hermione's own lack of artistic abilities.

If there was one good quality that she had succeeded in instilling in Theodore thus far, it was that these two houseplants must always be treated with the utmost respect; he did his level best to satisfy the pair with their new decoration.

Hermione's own satisfaction did not linger, though, for shortly upon finishing the project, Theodore smeared the blue paint across his face, declared himself "Sho-So," and took off through the formal dining room with his arms stretched wide, pretending to be a dragon. Thus began a game of chase, as Hermione and Dinky fought to protect the priceless furniture.

Tavaris made his first appearance at about the same time that Theodore was finally put a stop to — and made to cry, as Hermione's frustrated use of all four of his names had been in a tone quite antithetical to those tones taken in accordance with gentle parenting.

"Eventful morning?" Tavaris said, looking down at the three of them from the stairwell landing.

Hermione had blue paint all over her dress, and probably in her hair, too. Crookshanks was frantically attempting to clean some off his tail, hissing and gagging in turn, and Dinky was hunched over, hands on his knobbly knees, panting for breath. As for Theodore — frankly, at least he knew how to say the word *sorry* now.

"However did you know?" said Hermione sarcastically.

Tavaris continued down the stairs, chuckling. He seemed in a better state than she would have predicted; he had even shaved, rare these days. He was holding his black leather briefcase.

“Well, with any luck, your afternoon will go more smoothly,” he said. “I have a few meetings scheduled for today, and I’ll be stopping by the Malfoys this evening, so you needn’t expect me for dinner.”

He stopped before them all and frowned.

“Theodore, do stop crying. No harm has been done.”

Theodore took a big, rattling breath. Tears still streamed down his face, streaking through the paint.

“I m—maked Ma m—m—mad,” he whimpered.

“Made,” said both Tavaris and Hermione at once.

“*Maked* is not a word,” the latter added.

“Did he get paint on anything of value?” Tavaris inquired.

“No, Master,” Dinky assured him in a nasally squeak, as they attempted to scratch off the paint drying on the tip of their nose.

“Not to you,” said Hermione humourlessly.

He sighed.

“I understand it gives you a sense of control, being difficult, misguided though that sense is, but really, darling,” he said in exasperation, striding past her, “it’s very annoying.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes at his back, watching him turn into the sitting room. A moment later, she heard the *whoosh* of the Floo. Sighing, she hiked Theodore higher on her hip.

“Right. Let’s get you washed up,” she told him, trying to sound more spirited. “Our company will be arriving shortly.”

An hour later, Theodore was paint-free and sat sullenly on the sunflower-yellow rug in the lady’s parlour, watching Draco attempt to crush the wings of a toy Golden Snitch so it would stop flying away from him. Durably designed for the usage of small children, Draco was having no such luck. He was running out of time, too, for Crookshanks seemed on the verge of pouncing from Bedelia Avery’s lap and snatching the determinedly still-fluttering toy away between his jaws.

Hermione was too distracted to consider interfering, so surreal it was to see two-year-old Pansy Parkinson hovering nervously at the entrance to the parlour.

Her face, round and pale, looked more pug-like now with an excess of childhood chubbiness in her cheeks than it ever would in the future, and her bob of hair, shiny and black, was tied

back in a big pink bow. She bore little resemblance to her mother, Aurelia, who had the same dark blonde hair and smattering of freckles as the other Averys whom Hermione knew. But Aurelia's self-assured slouch and feline gaze, her daughter would grow to embody herself.

Now, she gave Pansy a little nudge and said clearly, "Remember what your father told you."

Almost at once, Pansy drew herself up and patted down the ruffles of her skirt. She marched right up to Theodore, who stood in slight alarm at her rapid approach, and stuck out her hand.

"Hello, Hei-'Eodo'e," she said, positively teeming with confidence. "I'm Miss Pansy Pa'kinson. How do you do?"

Theodore looked sceptical.

"Daddy says you take my hand now," Pansy informed him, but she whispered it, as if her intention was to offer instruction without letting anyone else know he needed it. "And you use *two* hands, OK? And you don't shake; you hold, 'cause I'm a miss."

He glanced down at her hand, then back up, wearing an expression that suggested he thought she was being incredibly dense.

"My name is 'Eodo'e."

"'At's what I says!" exclaimed Pansy defensively.

"*No*," insisted Theodore. "You says Hei-'Eedo'e."

"I say 'Eo!" Draco piped up, abandoning his toy Snitch, which was subsequently captured by Crookshanks a split-second later, with a surprised yelp from Bedelia.

He stood next to Theodore proudly.

"'Eo an' Yaco."

"*Draco*," Narcissa interjected firmly. "Dray-co."

He ignored her.

"D'aco," repeated Pansy. She wriggled her fingers impatiently. "You have to hold it!" Draco tugged on her hand, and she yanked it away, adding, "Not *you*!"

"Why I have to ho'd it?" Theodore asked her.

"'Cause Daddy says so."

"Why?"

Pansy did not appear to have an answer to this.

"Because it's good manners, Theodore," Hermione said.

“Oh.” He looked at her. “I have ‘ose?”

“You certainly ought to,” she told him, raising an eyebrow.

Theodore sighed as though having good manners sounded like an awful lot of work. Begrudgingly, he took Pansy’s hand.

Pansy glanced back at her mother quickly, as if making sure she was watching. Aurelia gave her a nod of approval.

“What now?” asked Theodore, still holding on.

Pansy beamed at him.

“Now I be *so* nice!”

He sighed again, looking disappointed.

“Uh-cos it’s good manne’s?” he surmised, in a bored voice.

She shrugged, disinterested.

“I guess.”

Several hours later, as he was tucked into bed, Theodore rolled onto his side to face Hermione, tugged his stuffed Short-Snout close, and announced without preamble, “She talks lots.”

“A lot, you mean,” said Hermione, adjusting his blankets.

“*A lot*. A lot, a lot, a lot, a lot —” Theodore kept repeating it until the words turned to babble, then he added significantly, “Even mo’e than *Yaco*.”

“Draco has barely a year’s worth of experience talking. Wait.”

“I like talks-a-lots,” he continued, as she sat down on the armchair. Crookshanks immediately hopped up on her lap, and she began to scratch him behind his ears. “You like talks-a-lots, Ma?”

Hermione studied him for a moment. He was certainly talking a lot himself right now, more than usual. A good idea, it had proven to be, to have him spend more time with other children, even if it meant she had to spend time with their mothers.

“I don’t know if I was friends with many people who talked a lot when I was a child,” she said finally. “I think I talked too much myself to ever find out.”

“Oh,” said Theodore, his gaze strangely sorrowful. He reached one hand out from under his blankets to pat her knee reassuringly. “I find out for you, Ma. ‘Kay?”

“OK. So you like her, then?” she asked concernedly. “Pansy.”

Theodore nodded, a relief. He would marry that girl one day; Hermione did not know what she would do if he did not like her. Although, with that said, she did not know what it meant for his taste if he liked her later in life, when she was the Pansy whom Hermione knew: dutifully tactless and invariably conceited.

"In that case, I shall have to arrange for you to see her again," she told Theodore heavily, resigning herself to another playdate with someone who used to pick on her. "Perhaps Bedelia's other niece will come, too, next time. She was saying just today that she wishes to introduce you and Daphne to each other. Would you like that? Another friend to talk to?"

Again, a nod.

"And you, too," he said seriously.

"Yes," she sighed, "I will be there, too, my —"

"Ma talks to friends, too."

Hermione fell silent.

"Ones not talking," he went on, in a tone he probably thought brokered no argument. "So you can talk lot— a lot. 'Kay?"

"OK," said Hermione quietly.

Once he had fallen asleep, she coaxed Crookshanks to lay down beside him, went into her bedroom, and locked their shared door behind her. She readied for bed, keeping one eye on the clock on her bedside table. At nine o'clock, she cracked open the door to the hall and crawled into bed to read the *Evening Prophet*.

She waited, refusing sleep, because Theodore was right.

Hermione needed to talk to a friend, too.

It was past midnight when she finally heard the *thudding* on the stairs — an uneven noise, a wavering walk. When he came to her open door, he stopped, as she had known he would. He entered, a bemused look on his sharp, lined face.

"What are you still doing up?"

Hermione put down the paper. "I couldn't sleep," she lied, and she sighed so she would sound frustrated by this.

"If it's any consolation," Tavaris said blandly, "you are far from the only person struggling to sleep these days."

He propped his walking-stick up against the footboard of the bed; it stayed put, so he must not have been as drunk as he could have. His robes, too, were soon slung over the footboard. Loosening his tie, he came round the bed. Hermione shifted over.

“I can’t even find anything remotely interesting to read,” she complained, as he dropped himself onto the mattress with a grunt. “It’s as if the *Prophet* is actually *trying* to be dull — as if that will somehow make people forget everything that’s happened. That’s not *your* doing, is it?”

“It’s as much a result of the Ministry’s influence as it is mine,” said Tavaris, shifting to get more comfortable. He slumped back against the pillows. “The best thing for everyone to do now is to forget, if not for their own sakes then for the sake of the economy. All the same, I do agree with you. This new scarcity of noteworthy news has been regrettably boring.”

Closer now, she could smell the smoke on him. She wondered briefly if Abraxas was any better off, after their evening of grieving together. Their drinking had not been celebratory, certainly; they had nothing to celebrate anymore.

“Though the potions market has finally balanced itself out,” Tavaris went on in a tired murmur, after a moment, “so we no longer seem to be at risk of a recession, as Leon McKinnon once predicted. I expect I’ll soon be hearing from the Potions Association about lowering the importation tax.” His expression turned sour. “We may have to host Theomund for a few days when that happens.”

Hermione leaned back and crossed her arms.

“Redirect him to a hotel,” she said, equally sour. “I read they’ve just reopened the wizarding floor at the St Ermin’s, now that they are no longer at risk of welcoming any ‘*undesired company*.’”

Tavaris snorted.

“Is that how they phrased it?”

“Page six yesterday morning, PR certainly had a hand in the wording. But English spies have long operated there — I expect they were opposed to a yet another war with German ones hoping to get in,” said Hermione. “You know, like Theomund.”

“Mm. Pity for them. He and the Undersecretary stayed on a Muggle floor last winter.”

She rolled her eyes at that. Then, as casually as she could, she drew a small, steadying breath and uncrossed her arms. She looked back at him, laying there with his hands clasped over his stomach, lost in thought. She needed to redirect this conversation.

“It went well today, I think,” she began, setting the *Prophet* aside. “Theodore seems to like her. The fact that she talks a lot was a selling point, apparently.”

“I chose my friends the same way as a child.”

“Believe it or not, I had noticed. Abraxas?”

Tavaris snickered. Smiling slightly to himself, he resettled, his head sliding down near her shoulder. She tried to steel herself.

“But as I was saying —”

“The selection at the time was hardly impressive,” he said, cutting her off. He didn’t seem to realise he even was. “Picture it, would you? It’s always better when you picture it.” He began gesturing as if to map out the scene right before her eyes. “There was Creighton Rosier who could never be spotted anywhere apart from hidden behind his older sisters; then, of course, there was Beldon Yaxley who, despite our proximity in age, was my uncle on my mother’s side, the fruit of my grandfather’s second marriage and conceited enough to prevent us from overlooking it; he got on with Landon Crabbe and Garfield Goyle, so those two were out of the question; and then there was Lachlan Travers who … frankly, was a complete wanker even at six.”

Hermione propped her elbow up on the pillows, dropped her head onto her hand, and supressed a sigh.

“Abraxas talked — a lot. So much, I needn’t have bothered myself. I answered to no one because Abraxas was made to answer for us both. Geoffrey, now, he had a lisp, nearly chewed off his own thumb, the age to which he kept suckling it. But he came with Elias … and Elias had *jokes* … ones we weren’t supposed to be in on, let alone laugh at …”

And there he stopped, and he did not continue. He shifted, as though suddenly uncomfortable, his body too tense to rest.

Hermione recognised this as her moment.

She lifted her head. Very slowly, she lowered her hand to his head and began to thread her fingers through his hair.

“And Edmund?” she asked cautiously.

Tavaris relaxed into her touch, exhaling a long breath.

“Edmund kept Abraxas humble … or made frequent attempts at it, rather …” He rested his hands once more on his stomach. “Perhaps it would be best to say that Edmund humbled him regularly enough for the lot of us to retain our patience.”

Hermione made a small noise that she hoped he would interpret as amusement. Still, she toyed with his hair.

“What I think of their character aside,” she started again, choosing her words carefully, “I cannot deny that they have all proven to be and to have been very good friends to you. But I … I cannot pick my own friends from this selection. You understand this, don’t you?”

“Well, your friends were of a different breed, darling.”

Her hand paused, then resumed.

“Is that your idea of a pun?” she asked, her voice tight.

Tavaris glanced up at her in surprise.

“A pun?” he said. His eyes widened as he cottoned on, and then he sniggered. “*Different breed* … Ah, that’s good …”

“Those friends are gone now, I do realise,” she forged on, with determination, “and even the ones who are not … well … I suppose they may as well be — what difference would it make to my life? But the people among this … selection … they cannot be the only people I ever see. I cannot go on being afraid of strangers in Diagon Alley or the crowd in the Leaky Cauldron. I’ll lose my mind.” She held her breath, and gingerly, she added, “My world has grown too small, Tavaris.”

“Are you requesting that I unshrink it?”

“Please,” she whispered.

He hummed thoughtfully, then toed off his shoes, let out a wide, jaw-cracking yawn, and said gruffly, “Well, as it so happens, I enjoy your mind; it would be a pity if you lost it so early on.”

Hermione did not sleep that night, impossible as such a thing was after Tavaris laid his head on her lap and promptly dozed off, her fingers still threaded in his hair. When he summoned her to his study directly after breakfast the following morning, however, she felt that maybe — just maybe — it might have been worth it.

No explanation had been provided, and even now, nearly five minutes after she had entered, it was unclear as to why she was there.

An old clock on the bookcase behind Tavaris’ desk ticked loudly in the silence. Only one other sound filled the room, produced by the blue velvet pouch Tavaris tossed from one hand to the other, jumbling the coins within.

She shifted on the chair and waited for him to speak, hoping.

At last, he seemed to reach a conclusion in his study of her, cleared his throat, and placed the coin pouch on the desk.

“Fifty Galleons, twenty Sickles, and ten Knuts,” he told her. “Any purchases above that price will require my approval.”

Hermione stared at the pouch, then at him.

“An allowance?” she said, taken aback. Previously, she had been able to spend whatever she pleased.

Tavaris inclined his head. “I shall replenish it on the first of every month. But it will never contain any more than this precise amount.”

So she could never save up, she understood. What she did not understand was —

“Why are you doing this now?”

The answer turned out to be quite simple.

“You will require pocket money when you go out.”

For a moment, she could have sworn she stopped breathing. Was this really happening? Had it truly worked? Floundering for sense, she started to stammer, “Wh—when I —”

“When you go out,” Tavaris repeated intently, watching her closely still. He leaned back in his chair. “You will notify either Dinky or Goppy, inform them where you are going and when you should be expected back, and they will provide you with the necessary Floo powder for travel. There is no reason you should be riding the Knight Bus. It’s lack of cleanliness aside, the characters on public transportation …”

He wrinkled his nose, even shuddered, so evidently repulsed by the very thought of those who rode the Knight Bus.

“Hags and goblins — even *Squibs* manage to somehow weasel their way aboard that contraption,” he sneered in distaste and shook his head. “No, you are better off taking the Floo.”

Hermione was too stunned to say anything. Her mind was swarmed with all the possibilities of what she could do — she could visit Remus now, without fear of retribution. Ten Sickles was more than enough to pay for the ride there, and as for the return, surely, the conductor would not turn down a Galleon.

It took her a second to register that Tavaris was still speaking.

“… much consideration, but ultimately, the benefits outweighed the potential drawbacks,” he was saying, as he aimed his wand behind his desk. There was a clear *click*, and then he was opening the top-right drawer and reaching inside. “When — and only when — you are about to depart, Dinky or Goppy will fetch it for you; if you so much as raise it whilst you remain on this property, they are both under strict orders to Disarm you.”

Once more, Hermione’s breathing faltered. She stared, stupefied and transfixed, unable to look away.

“You will stow it away, you will not use it until you have arrived at your destination, and the moment you return, it is to be handed back to either one of them or myself,” Tavaris continued, quite severely. “Failing to do this will result in the immediate suspension of your outings, during which time I shall re-evaluate whether they ought to be permitted to continue or not.”

Finally, he stopped. The clock continued to tick.

Then, with a short, disgruntled sigh, he confessed, “I do not take pleasure in the idea of you being out there alone without the ability to defend yourself.”

Hermione clasped her hands tightly in her lap, battling the urge to reach out and tear the cedar wand from his hand. Almost a minute ticked past before she managed to find her voice.

“If — if I cannot have it until I leave, why have you already taken it out?” she asked shakily.

She feared this was all some cruel performance for his own entertainment; any second now, he would snap the wand in half, just to see the hope drain from her eyes.

Tavaris gazed at her frankly.

“Because you want to leave right now.”

She looked away.

Before any more could be said, there was a small knock at the door. At Tavaris’ beckoning, Goppy poked his head in.

“Lord Travers to see you, Master,” he croaked.

Tavaris scoffed under his breath.

“The impatient dunderhead,” he muttered irritably, “he cannot be arsed to consider the eyes he’s still got on him, can he? I told him *quite clearly* it would be delivered in due time.”

His hands jerked like he wanted to knock something over or hurl it at the wall, but he was too smart to loosen his grip on either of the wands he held.

“He is waiting in the hall,” said Goppy awkwardly.

“Right.” Tavaris drew a deep breath (who knew he was capable of self-regulation) and extended Hermione’s wand — not to her, but to Goppy. “Mione will be heading out shortly. See to it that Dinky is watching Theodore.”

“Yes, Master. And Lord Travers?”

“Lord Travers can exercise his patience by waiting for Mione to send him in. Ensure he has no furniture to sit on.”

So much for self-regulation, then.

The clock ticked on for another minute after Goppy slipped back out. Hermione knew she was allowed to leave the study now, even without a clear gesture of dismissal; alas, she had quite forgotten how to work her legs.

The prospect of this new freedom was overwhelming. If she got ready quickly enough, she could be off the property and using a wand within the next fifteen minutes. What would she do with it? Which spell would she cast first?

But she feared that she was getting ahead of herself.

“Promise me this isn’t a trick.”

“Mione, darling,” Tavaris said plainly, “if I were truly playing a trick on you, I promise you that you would not think to ask me that.”

This time, Hermione chose her outfit carefully. When she boarded the Knight Bus outside of the Leaky Cauldron at half-noon, she did so in a crisp, cream-coloured knit frock, the closest thing to nylons she could find in her wardrobe, black buckled shoes and leather gloves, and her brown mink coat. She felt overdressed for where she was going but — and this was what mattered — like an overdressed Muggle.

She sat on the suspiciously stained seat gripping the cedar wand tightly in both hands. Even now, she was suspended in disbelief.

Beyond the window on her right, rain poured heavily, a blur that occluded whatever street the bus now hurtled along.

She realised suddenly, startled, that she could see her parents again, if she so wished — could hear their voices and feel their warmth, explain whom she was and what had happened, and ask for their help.

She could hug her mother.

Almost as soon as the thought came to her, however, the hope it carried dwindled. Her parents did not yet know about magic. Even if Hermione managed to make them believe her story, there was nothing either of them could do to help her now.

One day, she told herself, but she could feel her conviction slipping. *One day* was becoming too ambiguous to tie her hope to.

So, as the Knight Bus rumbled loudly on and the goblin in the next seat trimmed his fingernails, Hermione thought about a different *one day*; she thought about today.

Today, I am visiting Remus.

Sometime later, when the rain had finally let off, she emerged from the bus onto Whistler Way, a narrow residential road precisely one block west of Wanderers Street. Anyone could be on the Knight Bus; it would not do to have them all know her exact destination. She waited until the bus had taken off once more, and whilst its resounding *BANG* rang on in her ears, she set off down the rain-darkened pavement.

It seemed a quiet area, this part of Riverside, though perhaps it would be more accurate to call it deadened. The only whistling on Whistler Way was that of the wind as it swept a bit of rubbish off the pavement and beneath an old Morris Minor with a cracked headlight.

On her way down the block, Hermione encountered just one other person: a woman wearing hair rollers and a purple bathrobe who emerged from her house in a pair of wellingtons to check her post box. She gave Hermione a puzzled look, as if she couldn’t sort out what she was doing there.

Hermione strode onward, pulling her collar up about her neck to fend off the chill. Upon reaching Wanderers Street, she paused, glancing up and down the street, then turned left and continued to the next block, where, at last, she spotted the faded blue and gold sign for Jameson's pub and crossed toward it.

Somehow, last time, she had not noticed the view of the river just behind it. The wind was stronger for it, but fresher; the air filled her lungs to the brim with every breath.

At the chipped red door for Number 110B, Hermione adjusted her collar and nervously patted down her hair.

"It's Mione," she said into the intercom once she felt brave enough to press the button. "May I come up?"

She had rehearsed these words the whole walk there.

There was no response, nor any noises from above as Remus rushed down the stairs. She waited a moment and tried again; with still no success, she stepped back onto the pavement and looked up.

No light was on in the flat above the pub.

It had never crossed Hermione's mind that he might not be home. At once, she felt guilty for imagining him sitting about his flat, doing little more than wait for her to come knocking.

Remus had a life outside of her shrunken world; a life she did not know, and though she suspected it to be lacking, it was, nevertheless, a life.

She was not aware of how long she stood there, gazing up at his blackened windows and hoping desperately that a light might suddenly turn on, as if he had merely been hiding in the dark. Eventually, the door to the pub opened and an old white-haired fellow appeared — Scurvlock, she recalled. He smiled at her.

"Spotted you through the window," he said, and he nodded inside, holding the door open. "In you pop, love. Lupin's in the back."

The relief that Hermione felt at these words left her winded. She found herself smiling back at Scurvlock. Without a second thought, she hastened into the warmth of the quaint, low-lit pub.

"Thank you, sir," she said, as she wiped her shoes off on the mat. Removing her gloves, she looked around.

Not uncommonly for this time of day — unless, of course, it was still raining — the wooden booths and leather-seated barstools sat empty. Much less commonly, despite the emptiness, laughter boomed by the bar, where the Irishman called Jameson was pouring a pint, and music emitted from a jukebox wedged in the corner — *Delilah* by Tom Jones, which Hermione's father had sometimes sung when he was drunk.

“‘Sir’?” Scurvlock repeated, his eyebrows shooting high. “Just how old do you suppose I am, calling me ‘sir’?”

She went pink.

He waved away her apology before it had even left her tongue. “Alwyn Scurlock,” he introduced himself with a chuckle, offering a hand that she shook automatically. “Forgive me, I can’t seem to recall your name — dementia’s a trifling cunt of a flatmate in this dusty head of mine.”

Hermione’s mouth fell open.

From somewhere near the bar, someone burst out, “You’d best not be talking about me, Scurvlock, or you’ll next find yourself smothered in your sleep!”

Scurvlock jerked his head in the direction of the voice.

“My other cunt of a flatmate,” he explained.

“Right,” she said, flustered. “And it’s Mione.”

“Just Mione?”

“Just Mione,” she agreed.

“Well, come along, then, *just Mione*,” said Scurvlock, his eyes twinkling with humour behind his horn-rimmed glasses. He turned and led her to a table at the other end of the pub, just beside the bar, where the third man she had met back in November was sitting with a fresh pint, smoking a cigarette.

“Don’t believe a word he told you about me,” Skipper said, pointing severely at Hermione with the cigarette. “It’s all true.”

She tried not to wrinkle her nose at the smell. Grinning, Scurvlock pulled out a chair and gestured for her to sit.

“This is *just Mione*,” he told Skipper and Jameson, taking a seat on the nearest barstool.

“I’ve never met a *just Mione* before,” said Skipper, looking delighted. He switched his cigarette to his left hand to extend Hermione his right. “Cybi Pendry — you’re English, so that’s C—Y—B—I — *Cubby* — but you may as well just call me Skipper because anyone who called me Cybi is either dead or wishing *I* was.”

“Oh, dear,” said Hermione, with a slightly startled laugh. “Well, it’s a pleasure to properly make your acquaintance, Skipper.”

Jameson came round the bar to introduce himself.

“Bran McCabe, love,” he said, shaking her hand firmly. He stopped, glancing down, and laughed. “So, not *just Mione*, after all, I see. This one’s a missus.”

Skipper snickered. “That answers that question.”

Hermione regretted taking off her gloves. She pulled her hand back, smiling weakly.

“Do you mind if I ask: what is it your husband does?” asked Scurvlock curiously, eyeing her coat.

Nineteen-eighty-two, she reminded herself. Of course, no one would ask her what she did for work.

“He’s in politics,” she replied evasively.

“I see. And his is a name we would know, isn’t it, *just Mione*?”

Thankfully, before she had to come up with an answer to this, Jameson elbowed open a door behind the bar and hollered for Remus, who appeared a moment later with a broom in hand.

At the sight of Hermione, he froze; the swinging door came back to smack him. He didn’t appear to notice.

“Mione,” he said, sounding wrong-footed. “Er — hello.”

“*Er — hello*?” Skipper mocked.

“Is that how you greet a lady, Lupin?” asked Scurvlock.

“Sure explains why he lives alone,” said Jameson.

Remus’ expression became slightly pained.

“I didn’t expect to see you today,” he said, ignoring them.

“There was a sudden opening in my schedule,” Hermione told him awkwardly. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realise you would be …” she glanced at the broom, “… working.”

“Right,” said Remus, no less awkwardly.

Just then, he tripped forward out of the doorway as a woman in a striped apron whose black hair was dulled by grey appeared behind him, her hands on her hips.

“I can smell the smoke all the way from the kitchen, Cybi Pendry!” she said in a quick, sharp voice. She, too, was Irish. “You put that thing out!”

“See?” said Skipper, looking at Hermione. “*She* calls me Cybi.” To the woman, he added, “Don’t go chopsing me, Deirdre, you said we only had to go out for a smoke on weekdays!”

“And what *day*, Cybi, do you suppose it is?”

“Well, by your tone,” said Skipper haltingly, “I would have to guess it is not Saturday.”

“No. It is not Saturday,” said Deirdre shortly. “Today is *Monday*, which you would know if you knew yesterday was Sunday, which you would know if you ever got yourself out of bed before noon and to Sunday Mass!”

Jameson winced with clearly comedically-intended loudness.

“Hardly Skipper’s fault, that,” he said. “Last time he got himself out o’ bed, it was nineteen-forty-four.”

“Precisely!” exclaimed Skipper, slapping the arm of his wheelchair for emphasis. “If you’ve a problem with when I get out of bed, you can take it up with Scurvlock!”

Sighing, Scurvlock took the still-lit cigarette from Skipper’s hand and put it out on the ashtray that sat on the table.

“I will attend church when God does, Deirdre,” he said clearly. “And if God was not on Normandy Beach, I highly doubt he is present at your Sunday Mass.”

Deirdre looked ready to tear her own hair out. She threw up her arms and, in quite a huff, stormed back through the swinging door and into the kitchen.

Jameson gave a low whistle.

“I’ll be hearin’ about that tonight, I expect.” He turned to Remus. “You finish up later, lad. Spend a bit o’ time with your friend now, go on.”

Remus gave him a subdued nod.

“Cheers, Jameson.”

He went back into the kitchen to put away the broom. When he returned, he led Hermione out of the pub and onto the windblown street.

“They served in the Royal Navy together,” he explained, as they approached the chipped red door to his flat. “From what I’ve heard, I gather that Skipper was left paralysed after D-Day. Scurvlock looks after him these days.”

He cast a glance behind them, pulled his wand out of his trouser pocket, and in a few seconds, had unlocked all three locks on the door. He pulled it open, looking sheepish.

“Three separate keys feels a bit tedious at times.”

He ducked his head and stepped into the small stairwell, holding the door for Hermione to follow.

“Skipper and Scurvlock were both born here in Wales,” he continued as he turned each lock, and now he sounded like he was stalling. “After the war, Jameson and Deirdre — she’s his wife — moved down from Ballycastle to be near them. After you,” he added, gesturing.

Tensely, Hermione started up the stairs.

“Well, so Jameson could be near them,” Remus amended, ascending behind her. “I don’t believe Deirdre had much say in the matter.”

Inside the flat, he toed off his shoes, then, in an afterthought, pushed them against the wall with his foot.

“Tea?” he asked, as Hermione removed her coat. He did not wait for an answer, already turning toward the kitchen. “I’ll put the kettle on.”

She stuffed her gloves in her pockets and hung her coat up on one of the three empty hooks on the wall. On the other side, she could hear him rummaging through the cupboards.

The flat appeared, thankfully, still clean, though several weeks’ worth of *The Daily Prophet* had collected on the coffee table. She braced herself and entered the kitchen.

“Do you work there, then?” she asked Remus, as she sat down at the table. “In the pub.”

“Not quite. I require a certain amount of suspiciously-timed sick days that doesn’t inspire much confidence in my employers, even in the Muggle world,” he said, as he placed the kettle on the stove. “Jameson and Deirdre, they allow me to do a few jobs for them here and there when I — er — can’t make rent.”

“Oh.” Hermione didn’t know what to say to that.

Remus stayed facing the stove, his back to her.

“James used to cover it,” he admitted, after a moment.

“Oh,” she said again, quieter.

After another moment, he straightened up and went to fetch a pair of mugs. Then he continued stalling, not unlike she had done the last time she had sat at this table.

But she only had so much time before she would be expected back, and she was not willing to waste it.

“Anyway, no matter how menial, the jobs are never boring. Jameson is quite the story-teller, you know, he —”

“Did he offer you money?” she blurted.

Remus turned his head to give her a bewildered look.

“What?”

This was not what Hermione had planned on saying first. Seeing as it had come out of her mouth, however, she had no choice but to proceed.

“Tavaris,” she clarified. “At the Leaky Cauldron, I saw him take out his chequebook. Was he offering you money? I asked him but the only response I received was that it’s impolite to

accuse someone of bribery before breakfast."

Remus leaned back against the counter and stuffed his hands in his pockets, resigned to discuss this.

"No," he said stiffly, "he didn't offer me money — and I would never have taken it if he had. He got it out to retrieve a photograph." He nodded to the living area. "It's on the desk."

Perplexed, she got up to look.

The photograph was laying atop an old issue of *Witch Weekly* magazine (she figured this was not the time to inquire about that). Her eyes narrowing, she picked it up just as the kettle went off shrilly back in the kitchen. In the picture, she saw herself and Tavaris standing on the yellowed lawn behind the estate, both beaming brightly, her arms thrown wide as Theodore took his first steps toward her before collapsing into a heap of giggles for her to catch.

The intention rapidly became clear. Tavaris had done to Remus the same thing that the Dark Lord had done to her, with those keepsakes of Harry and Neville. An item both small and simple, so seemingly inconsequential, through which a cruel message was wordlessly relayed: *Have this, and weep when you look at it, because you know I will never let you near the real thing.*

Hermione drew a sharp, furious breath.

"I'm still trying to puzzle out why he gave it me," Remus said, suddenly near, "some picture he had taken of the three of you."

"He didn't *have* it taken," she said hotly, putting the photograph back down. "Barty Crouch Jr took it. I have the original framed."

Remus was silent for too long. She turned to find him perched on the arm of the sofa and holding two cups of tea. His expression was inscrutable.

"I was starting to wonder if you'd ever come back."

"I promised, didn't I?" she said, and immediately, she winced at her tone. She made an effort to soften her voice. "It merely took longer than I had expected. Life got in the way."

"It tends to," said Remus. "At least it's a sign you're still living."

He then sighed, weary and frustrated just like before, and put their teas down on the coffee table. He picked up one of the old papers.

"Over a month passed without hearing from you — without hearing anything at all — until one day," he said, in a tight voice, holding up the *Prophet*, "this arrives."

Hermione came closer to peer at it. Below a photograph of Martin Bones shaking hands with Minister Bagnold and its accompanying article about Barty Crouch Sr's removal from his position as Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, there was the headline: *LORD LESTRANGE DEAD AT FIFTY-FOUR*.

Remus cleared his throat and, his voice tightening still, read her a brief passage.

"'*At the time of Auror arrival at Nottingham Hall, only Lady Mione Nott and her two-year-old son, Theodore Nott, were awake. The pair had been taking breakfast next door to the room in which the Lestranges were staying. Lady Nott was unaware of Lestrange's passing and noticeably stricken by the news.*'"

He tossed the paper back on the table.

"Until I read that, Mione, I hadn't the slightest idea what sort of state you were in. No idea whether you were alright, whether you were still in Britain or had been absconded someplace else, whether you —" He pressed his lips together, avoiding her gaze. Barely above a breath, he confessed, "For a long time, the only reason we ever knew for certain that you were alive was that your death would've been publicised."

It now made sense why he had kept so many copies of the *Prophet*; left to wonder so long, he had been made to return to a long-standing wartime practice: searching the news for proof of life. Guilt twisted in her gut. She took a deep breath.

"You didn't hear from me, Remus, because I had Dragon Pox."

Remus scoffed disbelievingly, shaking his head at the floor.

"Repeating the same story only serves to make it less convincing each time," he said, dropping gracelessly onto the sofa. "A person can only contract Dragon Pox once, Mione, I'm afraid that's common knowledge."

"I know."

It took him a second, and then his brows furrowed, and finally, he looked at her.

"You had Dragon Pox," he said heavily.

"The morning after I left you, I woke up … well, green, really," Hermione said uncomfortably, because "with a rash" did not seem like a great way to end that sentence. "And my recovery took rather a long while because, for obvious reasons, I could not go to St Mungo's. Tavaris had to look after me while he brewed the cure himself."

That last bit, she wished at once she had kept to herself, left the rest up to the imagination, for Remus had looked away again.

"*Tavaris*," he repeated bitterly under his breath.

Wearily, she sighed and rubbed her temple.

"I know what you're thinking, Remus, and —"

"Oh, do you? Because the two of you seemed to be getting on splendidly until I showed up." He glanced sidelong at her, appearing genuinely flummoxed. "How can you stand to be near him?"

Now it was Hermione who struggled to hold his gaze.

“It’s complicated. He’s not *always* awful.”

Remus’ eyebrows rose nearly to his hairline.

“I realise what that must sound like, honestly, I do,” she insisted quickly, moving to join him on the sofa, “but you must understand that it isn’t so simple — none of this is. Perhaps it would be easier if it was constant or if there had not for so long been someone there to be more afraid of, but that isn’t the case, and I *cannot* —” her voice cracked, and she huffed in frustration, refusing to waste her tears on this once again. “I cannot fight him all the time, Remus. I tried. I ran out of energy.”

When Remus did not immediately say anything, further explanation rose in her throat, clawing to escape; she held herself back, not wanting to sound as though she were making excuses. Anxiously, she waited.

“How did you get here today?” he asked eventually.

Hermione let out a breath of relief. Her feelings regarding Tavaris was not a subject she wished to dwell on. Remus would not like what came up; she doubted she would, either.

“I suspect he believes if he allows me to leave, I will be less likely to leave on my own,” she said truthfully. “He even …” She trailed off, her eyes widening.

How could she have forgotten?

“He even gave me my wand,” she finished faintly.

Although she attempted to smother her surprise, there was no use; had he not seen it on her face, Remus would have heard it in her voice. The wand was still tucked away in her coat pocket, so accustomed she had become to being without it.

Perhaps this was not the sole reason she had forgotten, though. Perhaps it was also that once she had seen him, magic, for just a moment, had not mattered so much anymore, and had thus slipped from her mind before she could stop it.

“When was the last time you cast a spell?” he asked quietly, after a moment. “Do you remember?”

Of course, Hermione did. But the last time she had cast a spell had been in Azkaban, when she had run off with Tavaris’ wand, and she could hardly tell Remus that.

“The same day I got my new wand,” she told him instead. “The first thing I did was Conjure this little flock of yellow birds to circle above my head. Out of a thousand choices, that was what came to mind.” Her cheeks warmed at the thought of such childish delight. “It sounds silly,” she added bashfully, “doesn’t it?”

“I don’t think that sounds silly at all, actually,” replied Remus, gazing at her steadily now. “What did you cast next?”

She had not realised that she had begun to smile until she felt it fall at this question. She sat back, pulling her feet up on the sofa and tucking them in close.

"A Muffling Charm," she admitted, ashamed. "On myself."

So that she would not hear Gregorovitch screaming. The fine hairs at the back of her neck stood up at the memory, the cool imprint of a hand there, leading her out. She rolled her shoulders back.

"Where is it?"

"Where is —?" She blinked. "Oh, yes. It's in my coat."

Remus nodded, stood, and disappeared down the hallway. He returned a few seconds later with the cedar wand.

"Cast something else," he instructed her, holding it out.

"Like what?" she asked, as she took the wand from him. The wood was warm against her palm; she tightened her grasp.

"It doesn't matter what," he said easily. "Just something else."

Hermione's first thought was to Conjure those same bluebell flames she had once stowed in jars to keep Ron, Harry, and herself warm during the winters at Hogwarts; now, however, those flames provided another memory: Sirius trying to make out through the ever-dwelling dark the last words of his brother. Her next thought was to cast a Levitation Charm, but this only called forth the image of Moody suspended in mid-air, flailing his every remaining limb, so she considered the Summoning Spell instead; she nearly cast it, too, only to be reminded at the last second of Lily's letter torn forcibly from her person to fly into the Dark Lord's waiting hand.

Too many spells had gained too many negative connotations, over the years in which Hermione had been unable to cast them herself.

She cast her gaze about the room, searching somewhat desperately for inspiration. Then, aiming at Remus' record-player, she gave the wand a small flick. At once, the needle rose and swayed, then smoothly, it lowered; the record resumed its spinning, emitting a cool, strumming beat.

"*Some people call me the space cowboy, yeah*

Some call me the gangster of love …"

She turned her head to give him a disbelieving look.

"Remus, really?"

The song filled the whole of the flat, just as it must have done when it had last played, at this high, all-consuming volume.

“I happen to enjoy this album,” said Remus defensively, though he was starting to grin.

“Do you now?”

“Well, I enjoy the song I bought it for. I play the remaining eight a lot quieter than this.”

Hermione could sense her smile creeping back into place.

“*People talk about me, baby*

Say I’m doing you wrong, doing you wrong

Well, don’t you worry, baby, don’t worry

‘Cause I’m right here, right here, right here

Right here at home …”

Sitting back more comfortably, he nodded to her wand.

“Go on, then,” he encouraged, “cast another.”

This time, Hermione’s eyes landed on his hair, which, now that it was growing back out, looked worse than it had before he had cut it.

“Can I fix your hair for you?”

He patted it down self-consciously.

“Is it truly so awful?” he asked, smiling.

“It is certainly clear that you *tried*,” she told him, as nicely as possible. She stood and looked at him expectantly. “Come on, then.”

Remus followed her back into the kitchen, chuckling. She pulled out a chair, pointed, and waited readily behind it as he lowered himself to sit. Even here, the music was no less loud.

“*… I’m a joker, I’m a smoker*

I’m a midnight toker

I get my lovin’ on the run …”

“Have you ever cut men’s hair before?” he asked, sounding apprehensive.

“Out of desperation on a perfectly horrid camping trip,” Hermione grimaced, studying the uneven sandy strands at the nape of his neck. “He claimed that I cut it too short, but I think he had merely grown accustomed to resembling a stray dog.” She lifted her wand and, suddenly against her palm, felt not its warmth but the sting of a sharp line drawn across it. “You know, on second thought, I probably ought to use scissors for this. Being so out of practice,” she added in hasty explanation, stepping back, “I wouldn’t want to accidentally cut you.”

“I appreciate your honesty. First drawer left of the sink.”

She put her wand on the table, paused, then grabbed it again, tucked it into the front of her dress, and went to fetch the scissors.

“Anyway,” she carried on a moment later, beginning to cut, “short or long, his hair was going to stick up like that, regardless.”

“Who was this?” Remus asked, peering back at her curiously.

“Stay still,” she admonished, turning his head back herself. She snipped at another strand; it fell on his shoulder, and she brushed it off. “A very good friend of mine. Henry. We grew up together.”

“You’ve never mentioned him before.”

“No, I suppose I haven’t, have I? His — his aunt used to cut his hair for him — terribly, mind you.”

“It was always my mother who cut my hair. Just like this, on a chair in the kitchen.”

Hermione stilled. She lowered the scissors.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I know I’ve said as much but I really should have done so a lot sooner. Losing a mother …” She swallowed thickly, shook her head, and forced herself to resume cutting his hair. “I miss my own mother every second of every day. Even when I’m not thinking about her, I know I’m missing her.”

“Yeah,” Remus replied, in a rough voice.

“It’s not as though I need her to — to cut my hair or — or to remind me to brush my teeth, I just … I wish there was some way she could still give me advice.”

“Do you remember when we first met?” Remus asked her, seemingly at random. “With the sole exception of Frank, none of us had any idea how to react to the news that you had lost your parents. I remember the immediate silence that followed, as well as my own floundering, and then when — er — someone resorted to humour, we all gratefully let the subject be dropped to save us from the discomfort of trying to decide the right thing to say.”

“Yes. I remember that.”

“Loss — *true loss* — had been an unknown entity back then.”

“As it should have been,” she told him firmly. “No young person should know loss like that.”

“You are right, though,” said Remus, as the tiled floor was littered with more clippings. “It’s the words that get to you, isn’t it? The knowledge that she can never tell you anything new. You’ve already heard everything she will ever say to you.”

Hermione hoped that this was not already the case for her, but much more desperately, she hoped that Theodore would not reach a point in his young life that he had heard everything his mother would ever say to him.

“Reasons like that are why I stay where I do,” she confided, after a minute. “There are things I want to tell Theodore that I want him to remember, and much more I need to say that I can’t until far into the future, when he’s old enough to hear it.”

She ruffled Remus’ hair, dusting off the clippings that clung on. Having done what she could to repair the back, she moved to stand in front of him; he spread his legs to make room. Concentrating on her task, she continued.

“Everything I have got to tell him aside, he needs someone to look out for him. If I’m not there to do it, who will?”

*

There was little room in the chamber for all the first-years to stand, which seemed like very poor planning on Hogwarts’ part. Everyone was bunched uncomfortably together, most of them strangers still, as they awaited the return of the severe, sharp-eyed, and square-spectacled Deputy Headmistress — Professor Minerva McGonagall, who had soothed absolutely no nerves whatsoever by suggesting that they all take this time to try to smarten themselves up before the Sorting Ceremony began.

Here and there, things like “test” and “hurts a lot” kept cropping up in anxious voices. A red-headed boy said they would have to face a troll, according to his older brother. At one point, someone even mentioned a sphinx, which resulted in the boy who kept losing his toad immediately exclaiming in terror, “But I’m terrible at riddles!”

No one spoke much at all after that, each occupied by their own fearsome thoughts — save for a bushy-haired girl near the front, who was whispering rapidly about all the spells she knew and which ones she might have to use.

Her rambling only served to worsen Theo’s own anxiety.

There was no such test, he knew that; Pa had assured him, and after much wheedling and a promise to keep it a secret, Gaspar Avery had told him all he had to do was put on a hat. The trouble was, Theo would have to put on a hat in front of hundreds of people. This chamber alone held too many for his liking.

He tugged on his tie, trying to loosen it, but this proved difficult when the tie had not been tied properly in the first place. He regretted not asking someone for help.

Pansy sidled up to him.

“Are you nervous?” she asked in a hushed voice.

“I’m not nervous,” Theo said quickly.

She looked at him for a long moment, her gaze too intense and too searching. He didn't think she believed him. He drew himself up and lifted his chin to appear more self-assured.

"Well, *I'm* nervous," she announced abruptly, not whispering in the slightest anymore. She stuck out her hand.

Theo stared at it, uncomprehending.

"*Theo*!" Pansy whinged, seeming on the verge of stomping her foot. "Didn't you hear me? *I'm nervous*. You have to hold my hand!"

She wriggled her fingers impatiently.

He cast a tense glance about them, but anyone who was looking their way was mostly looking at Pansy — the true nervous one of the pair, as far as they knew. He wiped his palm on his robes as covertly as he could, so it wouldn't be too sweaty for her, and took her hand.

She gripped his back, really tight.

Almost at once, Theo began to relax. Somehow, Pansy's nervousness made him feel brave. One of them had to be, after all, so as to look out for the other.

Chapter End Notes

My sincerest apologies for the wait — the drafting process is slightly more migraine-inducing now that I don't have a canonical timeline already laid out for me, lol. My plan is solid now, though, so the wait shouldn't be so long next time.

The song played near the end was, if you didn't already know, 'The Joker' by Steve Miller Band.

Tug of War

Chapter Summary

> Broke your jaw once before
> I spilled your blood upon the floor
> You broke my leg in return
> So let's sit back and watch the bed burn
> — Kiss with a Fist, Florence + the Machine

Chapter Notes

> CW: As you may have guessed from the summary, this chapter contains domestic violence. But you're also going to learn a lot of random facts you probably didn't need to know.
>
> This is a long one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time spring was upon them, an odd but undeniable balance had been restored to the Nott household. That was, assuming a balance had ever existed there at all. As precarious as it was, it created a new sense of normalcy with which it was a great deal easier to live than it had been to live with the daily norms that had preceded it, during those years when nothing that was happening should have felt normal.

With more and more afternoons arranged to be spent with those whom Hermione knew he would one day be friends, Theodore's speech slowly but surely progressed as it should have done months ago. Albeit begrudgingly, she had to accredit Pansy for at least a portion of this improvement. As eager as Pansy was to fill any bout of relative silence with a stream of her own thoughts and opinions, she was significantly less eager to be ignored; she gave Theodore no choice but to reply, if only to voice his agreement.

What really got him talking, however, was when he disagreed.

"G'ass is *always* g'een!" Pansy repeated hotly a third time in mid-March, during what began as an afternoon stroll in the seemingly weather-resistant gardens of Malfoy Manor. In the distance, Dobby and Narcissa could be spotted working frantically to stop Draco from provoking the albino peacocks.

"*No*," Theodore said forcefully, glowering. "Not al'ays! At my home it's lell-oh."

“Don’t be silly!” Pansy snapped, balling her hands up into two tiny fists. She hit the ground angrily. “G’ass can’t be *lell-oh*!”

“Uh-cos why?” he retorted. “Uh-cos you says so?”

“‘Cause *Daddy* says so! ‘Cause skies is blue and *g’ass is g’een*!”

He craned his neck, then pointed to the clouds above them.

“‘At’s not b’ue!”

Sat in the middle of the pair on the Malfoys’ meticulously manicured lawn was Daphne Greengrass, whose bright eyes flitted back and forth between them, her mouth opening and closing in turn, as if she were the failing mediator of a heated political debate.

“Yes, it *is*, ‘Eo! Daddy says so!”

“Pa says your daddy on’y says stuff uh-cos he’s a gam-ler!”

Pansy let out a harpy-like shriek.

“No, he’s not!” she shouted, so affronted she had to stand up. “G’anddaddy is a gam-ler but *not* Daddy ‘cause he al’eady gives *all* his empty pockets to *me*!”

At this, Aurelia Parkinson, too, was standing.

“*Pansy Edolie Parkinson*!”

She strode swiftly from the bench from which she, Hermione, and Bedelia had been watching, seized Pansy by the wrist, and jerked her round to look her in the face.

“We do not discuss matters of the family in public!” Aurelia said, in a voice cold and sharp and inciting of (potentially crocodile) tears. “When I tell you things in private, I expect you to keep them to yourself! You ought to count yourself lucky only Aunt Bedelia and Lady Mione were close enough to hear you — had it been anyone else, I would be dragging you back home this very moment so that your grandmother could have words with you.”

And then, as Pansy stood there squeezing her eyes shut and screaming shrilly in protest, Aurelia returned to plop gracefully back down on the bench. She recrossed her legs, rolling her eyes.

“Presleigh really *is* so eager to empty his pockets for her, you know. It’s insufferable, don’t you see,” she told Hermione and Bedelia disparagingly, gesturing to her daughter, “she’s growing into such a spoiled young thing.”

Bedelia tried to hide her grimace politely, whilst Hermione could sense her eyebrows inching ever upward.

“As for her remark about Paulus?” she inquired.

“Oh, off he pops nearly every weekend to meet Pollux Black at that dingy betting shop in Knockturn Alley,” Aurelia drawled with vast disinterest, one foot kicking out idly at the air, “though at the moment, of course, they’ve gone to Suffolk to see about some supposed cross-species descendent of the Godolphin Arabian and the Abraxan.”

As she spoke, and as Pansy continued to scream, Daphne bent her bow-topped blonde head toward Theodore, who then nodded emphatically and said, quite loud, “She *never* has pockets!”

Meanwhile, even Tavaris had regained some semblance of his old self. Little by little, he returned to a schedule by which to conduct himself and his affairs.

Once more, he was hosting drinks on Thursday nights, albeit now solely with Abraxas and Cygnus Black, whose initial return of presence unfortunately meant Hermione had been forced to explain to his face why she had no interest in replying to his sister’s letters from the fall. Sundays were better, for instead of the bimonthly visit from Bellatrix, it was now merely Gaspar Avery, who came for instruction on a plethora of legal matters — necessary instruction, too, seeing as he was the head of his own house and without anyone to explain to him what this role entailed beyond the scraps of information and meagre moulding his father had bestowed upon him growing up. He knew how to oversee the running of his household, but when it came to his inherited seat on the Wizengamot, he had, it turned out, been entirely winging it.

“Why is it the ‘B’ in *bill* isn’t capitalised here,” he asked, pointing to a page of *Magical Misdemeanours and the Modern Law*, “but never in the legislature they make us read?”

“It’s only capitalised when a specific bill is being referenced,” Hermione piped up to tell him, for she was prone to envy-fuelled hovering during these lessons.

Gaspar nodded and resumed his reading. Not a minute passed, however, before he asked, with some reluctance, “And what’s the difference between legislature and legislation? Are they not interchangeable?”

“*Well —*”

“Legislature is introduced,” Tavaris explained, beating Hermione to it, “whilst legislation has been enacted — and for Merlin’s sake, Mione, you needn’t keep breathing down his neck just for a chance to participate. Sit down.”

She gave an indignant huff but, a second later, caved and joined them at the formal dining table, strewn presently with legal documents and texts.

“Now,” said Tavaris, shuffling some papers, “as per the revision of the Living-Impaired Code of Conduct that was mentioned toward the end of Friday’s session, you’ll want to familiarise yourself with the Hornby case as well as Chapter Four of *Legal Rules for Roving Sprites* regarding haunting with malicious intent.”

Along with the restoration of his routine, he seemed to have found himself a new sense of purpose — though whatever it was remained a mystery to Hermione. Still, he must have

found it lacking somewhat, for there remained those days when he was either sullen and silent or, worse, quicker to anger. On these days, she knew that he was mourning Edmund, maybe mourning Elias Avery as well, and most assuredly, mourning the life he had lead before, the driving force of which had been the source of his every action and ambition for over two-thirds of his nearly fifty-six years.

As March bled into April, however, these days became fewer and farther between.

Often, she was reminded of that same softness he had possessed after Theodore had been born; his sudden — albeit slight — agreeability and the unnerving affection that had accompanied it. A highly conditional softness though it certainly was, contingent upon her continued compliance, she nevertheless found, shamefully, that it was a welcome reprieve. A kiss on the cheek before he left in the morning was better than a sharp yank of retaliation that sent her rolling across her bedroom floor.

A kiss did not leave a mark.

And if she allowed it without comment, he would not come stumbling in at night, searching for company.

What was more, Hermione, too, soon found herself a purposeful pursuit — one which went beyond her weekly trips to the flat above Jameson's pub and her subsequent hasty visits to Diagon Alley to avoid returning empty-handed. Inspired by her conversation with Remus in February, she dedicated the remainder of her spare time to yet another new project: words.

Whenever the time came for her to leave, she was determined to ensure that there would be words left behind; messages from his mother — regardless of how meagre they may be in written form — to keep Theodore company in her absence until that distant day on which she would return to deliver him more, in person.

Tavaris considered the idea — or, rather, the half-truth as it was phrased to him — "a clever way of ensuring Theodore does not put too much stock into the plainly insubstantial information that the Ministry of Education permits the students under its jurisdiction to be provided," and therefore did not have to be persuaded to obtain copies of all the booklists from Abraxas, whose spot on the Hogwarts Board of Governors allowed him unfettered access to such documentation. Hermione had all seven copies in her hand by the end of the day. Although these lists would not maintain their accuracy in the coming decade, it was as good a place as any to start.

One by one, she began to annotate Theodore's schoolbooks.

Initially, she worried that she would not have enough to say that would reasonably add to their contents; all it took was opening that first book — *Magical Theory* by Adalbert Waffling — to realise this would not be the case.

Hermione did not make it past the blurb on the first page.

She scoffed, dipped her quill in the brand-new pot of blue Quick-Dry Ink that Tavaris had bought her for this task, and wrote beneath it: *For those who possess the curiosity of a flobberworm. For more comprehensive definitions, see "Theories of the Fundamental Elements" by Eleazor Fig.*

"Weary of Waffling already, are you?" Tavaris said from the head of the formal dining table. "I find he does tend to waffle on." He smiled amusedly at his own pun.

Before him was a spread of documents to be reviewed, among them a lengthy report written by Arthur Weasley which cited all the ways in which carpets were distinctly non-magical and therefore ought to be deemed a Muggle Artefact by the Registry of Proscribed Charmable Objects. If (though, really, when) the legislature went through, flying carpets would officially be banned in wizarding Britain. Tavaris had been in less official meetings with fellow seat-holders all day to discuss it. Despite the fact that brooms had long been the more popular mode of flight in Britain, several seat-holders — namely, the oldest of them — were reluctant to give up their twelve-seater Persians from Black Carp Co..

"It's clear that his intention was to simplify matters so students would better understand," Hermione began fairly, trying not to eye the work too greedily, "but honestly — there's so much more to know about Gamp's Law than a couple of numbered lists and a brief background on the wizard who coined it."

"Who?" asked Theodore curiously.

"Gamp," said Hermione and Tavaris together.

"Oh. Does that winnard keep coins in G'ingotts, too?"

"No, he donated them all to help fund the establishment of the Department of Mysteries," said Tavaris, returning his attention to his work, "much to the dismay of his cousin Ulick who was serving as Chief Warlock at the time and would have inherited everything after his death."

Theodore's eyes grew very big.

"What Pa *means* to say is that he lived a very long time ago so he would not still have money to put in the bank today," Hermione hastened to clarify. "And *coined* does not refer to literal coins. It means an idea or word was *invented* by someone." At his blank stare, she added for further clarification, "It means someone made something up."

"Oh." Theodore nodded to himself, then, curiosity satisfied, returned to his own task of locating the letters of his name from a scattered assortment of colourful cards with painted pictures of magical creatures and household items on the backs. It did not take long for him to find the card with a massive green 'T' on it; he tapped it, and a disembodied voice said clearly, "*'T' for troll*."

A minute passed — almost.

“Ma?”

“Yes, my love?” said Hermione.

“Pa?”

“What is it, Theodore?” said Tavaris.

“What winnard coined coins?”

The remainder of the week followed this same theme.

“What winnard coined poh-rid?” he asked over breakfast the next day, as he inspected the glob of porridge oozing down his upright spoon.

“No one quite knows who invented porridge,” Hermione answered, giving him an apologetic look. “However — don’t hold your cutlery like that — thank you — the earliest evidence of humans eating something *like it* dates back thousands of years ago in Ancient Greece and Rome.”

“*Wow*,” said Theodore emphatically. “‘At’s a lot o’ years.”

She nodded in agreement.

“And it may very well have not been a wizard who first discovered how to make it,” she told him pointedly. “In fact, it’s much more likely that it was a Muggle — which is someone who cannot do magic — right?”

“Yeah —”

“Yes.”

“Yes. Not like us uh-cos we *can* do magic. On’y,” he added uncertainly, “like us uh-cos they eat poh-rid?”

She gave him another nod, smiling encouragingly.

“That’s precisely right, my love. Anyway — porridge as we know it has its roots in Scotland. We English mostly fed our oats to the horses.”

Theodore was less enthused by this answer.

“What winnard coined books?” he interrupted on Tuesday afternoon, in the middle of Tavaris’ embellished reading of Beedle the Bard’s *The Wizard and the Hopping Pot*.

Tavaris gave a thoughtful pause.

“I don’t believe any one person could have truly been the first to invent the book,” he said, furrowing his brow. “Perhaps it depends on how you would define a book. Is it merely a

collection of writings or must it be bound as we typically imagine books to be today?"

Theodore leaned sideways on his lap to stare up at him. He looked abruptly overwhelmed, as if this were too many things for one to possibly wonder all at once.

"They were first mass-produced following the invention of the printing press in fifteenth-century Germany," Hermione put in, as she refreshed her cup of tea, "which was a very big tool that made creating books faster and easier so more people would have the chance to read them. And that was invented by Johannes Gutenberg, who was a Muggle."

He shook his head in amazement.

"Oh, my g'ness, Ma."

She smiled and sipped her tea.

"Ah-ish-ard-co too-pashe?" he asked on Wednesday evening through a mouthful of spearmint spit, as he sat on the marble countertop in the conjoining bathroom and brushed his teeth.

Hermione leaned forward to spit her own toothpaste out in the sink, rinsed her mouth, then said matter-of-factly, "Toothpaste is actually a more recent invention; it was created in the eighteen-twenties by someone named Dr Peabody — he was a dentist, which is what Muggles call Healers who take care of people's teeth."

Theodore removed the small wooden toothbrush from his mouth, widening his eyes.

"Ee-ah-ee Muh-uh, 'oo?" he garbled in astonishment, foamy toothpaste dripping down his chin.

"Indeed," she confirmed with a laugh, endlessly pleased, "Dr Peabody was a Muggle, too. Now keep brushing — Narcissa spoiled the lot of you with sweets today and I don't want to see any yellow."

"WHAT WINNARD COINED TEDDIES?" he bellowed out the nursery door late on Thursday night, roughly three hours after he had been tucked in.

Hermione emerged from her bedroom incredulously, at the same time that Tavaris shouted back from the ground floor, "*A GERMAN*!"

"*Nineteenth century*!" shouted another voice a second later, which was followed by the distant sound of scattered laughter.

Theodore furrowed his brow, then, without leaving his doorway, yelled very loudly, "WHO SAYS 'AT?"

"*Cygnus Black*!"

"Oh — *TANK YOU, CIGS*!"

“It was a German *Muggle*,” Hermione said, annoyed, and she pointed to the nursery. “Back to bed — or must I count to three?”

“*What winnard coined soap*?” he cried in distress during his evening bath on Friday, when some of the suds from his bubbly beard managed to get in his eyes.

“Evidence suggests it was the Muggles of the ancient world,” said Hermione hastily, grabbing the first towel within reach. “Keep your eyes closed — *oh, I’m sorry, my love* — I know it stings!”

And on Saturday, aggrieved: “What winnard coined *any’ing*?”

Tavaris lowered his wine goblet with raised eyebrows.

“*Wizards*,” he began, slowly and clearly so as not to be misunderstood, “have been responsible for every spell, every potion, salve, or elixir, and every magical theory, device, product, or mode of travel that has ever come into existence.”

“But not *soap*?”

“Theodore —”

“It’s soap!” exclaimed Theodore, becoming hysteric. “We *need* soap, Pa! Or we be so smelly! *And too-paste*!”

“And there are magical versions of both which you regularly use yourself, not to mention spell-casting alternatives that will do one just fine in a pinch,” Tavaris informed him strictly, setting his goblet down. “It is important that you understand, the very *foundations* on which the wizarding world has functioned and continues to function were constructed almost entirely by the ideas of thousands of wizards over the course of thousands of years. *Soap*, Theodore, was invented whilst wizards and Muggles lived alongside each other without the acknowledged distinction of today.”

Theodore absorbed very little of this, evidenced by his next question: “Do winnards hate Muggles uh-cos Muggles don’ share ‘eal soap wit’ us anymo’e?”

“*Real* soap?” repeated Tavaris, his eyebrows rising further.

“As a matter of fact,” said Hermione smartly, more than eager to involve herself on this subject of conversation, “pure-blood supremacism — which essentially means hating Muggles for no other reason than that magic does not run in their blood — was originally considered a completely unfounded opinion to have —”

Tavaris promptly sat forward.

“— that is to say, everyone thought it was ridiculous.”

“Hardly everyone, darling,” he cut in, with a strained smile of gritted teeth. “And that doctrine was far from *unfounded*.” He looked back at Theodore. “It was Muggles who were ultimately responsible for the division of our worlds —”

“Largely due to the popularisation of Christianity,” added Hermione swiftly, “and its negative views toward magic —”

“*Leading*, of course,” Tavaris tacked on pointedly, “to the witch-hunts that continued *well* into the eighteenth century —”

“— and Christianity, though deeply ingrained in wizarding culture —”

“No less than Paganism — think of Yule, Theodore —”

“— and still subscribed to by some wizarding folk today —”

“Not us.”

“— was — we put up a Christmas tree, too, you mustn’t forget — was, as far as we know, a religion coined by Muggles,” she finished finally, slightly out of breath. “That’s Christianity, to be clear.”

Theodore dropped his cutlery on the table, threw his hands up, and slumped back in his chair in exhaustion.

“Oh, my g’ness,” he huffed, quite exasperatedly for a two-and-a-half-year-old. “Winnards didn’ even coined *hate* …”

There was a long pause, as much one of floundering as it was of mutual frustration, then Tavaris turned to Hermione again.

“I only answered his questions!” she jumped to defend before he could speak. “And besides, what did you want me to tell him — that Pepper-Up Potion was invented by Glover Hipworth sometime near the end of the eighteenth century? He has never been poorly a day in his life — he doesn’t even know what that is!”

“What what it is?” interjected Theodore at once, but then he flapped his hand and let out another huff. “Ne’er mind, Muggles p’obably coined it.”

Tavaris’ nostrils flared. But he held back, clenching his jaw, and merely grabbed the decanter of elderberry wine to top himself off.

“We ought to be grateful he’s speaking at all,” Hermione said a short while later, after plates had been cleared and Theodore had spotted Crookshanks in the hall and run off to catch him. “Whether we like what he is saying or not is irrelevant right now.”

“You needn’t remind me,” said Tavaris tersely, leaning back to stretch his legs out beneath the table. He nursed his wine still.

“It bears repeating, nonetheless.”

After a moment, he scoffed and shook his head to himself.

“Irrelevant, Mione?” he said, giving her a flat look. “When have either of us ever believed our own opinions were anything but entirely relevant to the conversation?”

Hermione finished her own wine with a long sip and stood.

“Then I suppose being conversational killjoys was bound to come back to haunt us eventually,” she said plainly, “because it seems he has already inherited that trait.”

And indeed, it proved that Theodore had — at least in the case of those with whom he was most comfortable.

“Eel-yeh, what soap d’you use when you wash up?” he asked over a week later, stuck on this subject even still.

Bedelia appeared startled by the abruptness of his inquiry. She lowered her tea and saucer to hold on her knee.

“Well, the soap Gaspar and I have at our house is from Mr Mulpepper’s Apothecary,” she said, sounding bewildered. “It’s Bewitched to scrub your hands for you, so long as you ask it nicely.”

“So you hate Muggles?”

Her jaw dropped.

“Uh-cos Muggles coined soap,” Theodore informed her, very matter-of-factly.

“We are wizards, Theodore,” said Narcissa coolly. “We do not use the same soap as Muggles.”

“We have our own magical versions, you see,” Bedelia explained more patiently, “and not only of soap. We have our own *perfumes*, for example, and —”

“What winnard coined perfumes?”

Several looks were exchanged.

“Well, it would have been the French,” said Aurelia Parkinson, though she seemed unsure, “would it not?”

“Perfumes were being used in India over three-thousand years ago,” said Hermione. “The first known *perfume-maker*, however, is believed to have been a Muggle — in Mesopotamia, I believe.”

Theodore gave Bedelia a significant look, as if this fact proved his point — whatever he believed that point was. He turned on the spot, took back Daphne’s hand, and the two scurried off back across the trimmed grass, the sun beaming down upon their heads.

On a day such as this one, the approach of warmer weather still was unignorable. The winter felt to have lasted a lifetime. Everything bad that happened seemed to happen in the cold,

whether it be on the icy, snow-covered ground or amidst the sodden scatter of multicolour leaves. But this was hardly the truth, was it?

Hermione tried to squash the thought, the memory, for there was no use in ruining a rare sunny day for herself. Yet, despite her continuous attempts, the thought persisted: bad things happened, too, when the weather was warm.

The gardens of Nottingham Hall were in full bloom, its hedges the brightest of greens, its lawn manicured in even stripes, the sweet scent of its flowers floating through the air, its fountain trickling gently, and the laughter of small children ringing all throughout.

Gregory Goyle was sat on the stone steps of the outdoor entrance to the natatorium, wiping his persistently runny nose on his sleeve but otherwise keeping still, as Pansy and Millicent Bulstrode (the newest addition to their group) stuck daisies in his mop of fuzzy brown hair. Nearby, Theo had returned to picking more wildflowers for them with the help of Daphne, whose clothes, like his, were already covered in grass stains.

“Your son is very well behaved, Jillian,” Narcissa remarked conversationally, as she perched primly on an ornate iron garden chair, her teacup and saucer poised on her lap. “I would not have expected such a degree of patience from a boy his age.”

Just then, Draco zipped past on his toy broomstick, squealing brightly. A second later, Vincent Crabbe — a slightly pudgy child with a grin too big for his face — appeared toddling after him, trying to grab hold of the broom’s bristles.

“Yes, it is so very rare, isn’t it? But he is an exceptionally good listener, my Gregory,” Jillian Goyle said, nodding impressively.

“I’m sure he is,” said Hermione, with false enthusiasm. “Let us hope it is not to a detrimental degree.”

“More tea, Lady Crabbe?” asked Bedelia abruptly, probably so no one would think too hard on that last statement.

She leaned forward to reach the tea service resting on the glass table between them all. Her handle on the pot was tremulous; when she picked up the porcelain milk saucer, she used her left hand to stop the shake in her right.

“Why, thank you, dear — heavy on the sugar if you please. Heavier. They are an exhausting sort, are they not?” said Kaelyn Crabbe, in an overly dreary tone of voice. On her plump, pinched face was a weary expression that begged for their rapport. “I am constantly astounded by the stamina of small children.”

“My goodness,” said Millicent’s mother, Annora Bulstrode, with an exasperated groan, “you’d think they sleep but no!”

“Oh, scarcely a wink!”

“Where would we be without house-elves?” sighed Narcissa.

Grateful that your daughter-in-law is more progressive than you, Hermione thought, but there was no humour in it, not when that daughter-in-law was presently the infant on her right, swaddled sweetly in her mother's arms.

Hermione had seen a lot of living ghosts in this time, but none so small or so fragile as Astoria Greengrass. It was a gut-wrenching experience to gaze upon an infant and to have, despite this fact, already laid flowers at the foot of her grave.

For Astoria's funeral, she had actually attended, with Harry and Albus Severus, and the terrible truth was that it had been a long time coming. A generational blood curse: a death that dragged on over the course of several years. Hermione was having difficulty tearing her gaze away.

Finally, a sudden scream from nearby drew her attention; Crabbe — Vincent, that was — had collapsed face-first on the grass and was now wailing for his mother, flailing his stubby legs and slamming his balled fists on the grass. Kaelyn made a tired gesture; the Crabbes' house-elf, Dinny, hurried from her side to soothe him.

Hermione felt sick to her stomach. As covertly as she could, she put her nose to her wrist for a whiff of floral perfume to overpower the memory of burning wood and hair. She forced down a sip of her tea.

"Your son is such a darling boy, Lady Nott," Cecillia Greengrass told her kindly, or at least in a kind voice. She was watching their children from afar. "I am surprised he and Daphne play so well together. Perhaps it is a result of her shyness, but she typically prefers the company of more excitable children — namely, her cousin."

Aurelia rolled her eyes widely and openly.

"Have you heard from Preciosa at all lately?" Bedelia asked her. "Is she still visiting her Great-Aunt Pat in Ireland?"

"Oh — yes," said Aurelia, quite curtly. "She's been having such a lovely time that she plans on extending her visit."

"Really? She has been there for nearly six months already," said Bedelia, frowning slightly. She looked like she was about to say more, but then Aurelia cleared her throat, Cecillia *tutted* lightly, and Narcissa gave a small sniff of distaste, and she shut her mouth.

The subject of conversation was swiftly changed. Jillian Goyle leaned over to whisper confusedly to Kaelyn.

"Now, Lady Nott, I am aware that in the past you have been averse to joining," Annora Bulstrode began brusquely, and at once, Hermione knew where she was going with this, "but the Ladies' Tea Society is currently in the process of searching for new members. Your name has come up more than once. Why, even my brother-in-law has recommended you, and what does he know about philanthropy, let alone the qualities of one suited to it?"

Her brother-in-law, the Death Eater. Had she any idea, or had Morcant Bulstrode whispered in her ear to make nice, trusting her ignorance of his past allegiances?

“Businessmen,” Jillian muttered reproachfully, “they fancy themselves experts on everything.”

Aurelia snickered into her tea.

“I realise you may not know me as well as others who have sought to convince you before,” Annora continued straightforwardly, pretending to have not caught that snipe at her husband (and his lack of title), “but I must urge you to take the time to reconsider the offer.”

“These days, there are so few candidates worthy of an invitation,” Narcissa remarked, with unhesitating disdain.

She received nods all around.

Hermione’s teeth were clenched too tightly for her to speak.

“What is more, we have lost so many of our members to tragedy in recent years,” said Cecillia regretfully. She held Astoria closer, exhaling a mournful sigh. “Just at today’s luncheon, we lost another — Winifred Crouch. She resigned, the poor thing.”

“She looked positively *ill*,” said Kaelyn, in a hushed voice. “And she barely touched the lemon cakes, which we all know Augusta Longbottom puts out just for her.”

“Yes, it was quite horrid,” said Narcissa.

“My father used to call her the dust bunny,” Aurelia shared; “one strong gust and she’d scatter to the wind.”

“You do not suppose she will —” Jillian hesitated, shifting in discomfort, “— follow Morgan Travers’s example … do you?”

“They were very close,” said Cecillia quietly.

“When she made the announcement, you know,” Annora said after a pause, looking once more at Hermione, “Mrs Crouch recommended you take her place. She believed you could make a true difference — and frankly, as do I.”

“Indeed,” said Kaelyn, with a nod. “You have your husband’s ear, my dear.”

She looked as though she genuinely believed this.

“Merlin knows *Garfield* would never permit me to weigh in on his politics,” muttered Jillian bitterly.

“Bedelia — tell her what you told that Auror!” said Aurelia abruptly. “The one with the good eyebrows.”

Bedelia started, blinking, as though surprised to have been called upon. The smile she gave Hermione was inexplicably imploring.

“Auror Emmeline Vance came by the house one morning back in November to inquire after you and Lord Nott.”

Hermione’s heart quickened.

“What exactly did you and Gaspar tell her?”

“Gaspar said scarcely a word, actually. It was me to whom she wished to speak,” said Bedelia. “Just me.”

“My brother was asked to vacate the room,” Aurelia added, her dark eyes glittering with glee.

“What did *you* tell her, then?” Hermione asked Bedelia keenly.

“Very little. It was not a long conversation. I merely expressed that the two of you are significantly better suited to one another than most of the married couples I know,” she explained, sounding bewilderingly truthful.

“And, of course,” Aurelia cut in, apparently unable to restrain herself, “that *you* are the one who holds the *true* power in your house.”

Hermione was shaken. As far as anyone here was aware, the Dark Lord would never return to their lives. The importance placed upon those rumours which had haunted her and haunted her dreams still should have dissipated alongside his strength. Yet here she was, once again surrounded by people so blatantly determined to butter her up, so blindly convinced that she could somehow improve their standings. What did they suppose they had still to gain?

Belatedly, she realised that they were all awaiting a reply, or perhaps, at the very least, some sign on her face which would tell them that they were on the right track in terms of convincing her.

She turned her head, unable to stand it.

Theodore was now leaning over the rim of the small stone fountain, gazing down into the clear water. He and Daphne were dropping flower petals in and watching them float, evidently enthralled by the discovery of their buoyancy.

“Do excuse me a moment,” Hermione said tersely, placing her tea and saucer on the table, “I’m going to see how supper is coming along.” Without waiting for a response, though several came, she stood and strode across the garden and straight through the big open doors of the formal dining room.

Fresh air flowed through the long room and into the Great Hall, yet it was as stuffy inside as it had suddenly become outside. As she crossed the Hall, she undid the topmost buttons of her robes, struggling to breathe. Her skin felt overheated, itching. By the time she stepped up into the lounge, with its gilded mantle and royal-blue upholstery, she had started to sweat.

"— shameful, is what it is. If it were me, I would never have allowed Jillian to resign. That family is not only accepting defeat but standing atop a hill as they thrust a white flag in the air and —"

"Tavaris — a word, please."

Garfield Goyle paused; a hush fell over the whole group.

Over Lucius' shoulder, Hermione caught a glimpse of the front page of the *Evening Prophet*; the date appeared to have been emboldened, printed specially just for today, just to jump out at her: *2 May 1982.*

Gaspar dropped his head on the back of the loveseat to look at her upside-down, grinning.

"Are the hens squawking too loudly for you out there?"

Hermione ignored him.

"Tavaris," she repeated impatiently.

"Is something the matter?"

"Be quiet, Gaspar. *Tavaris*."

Although it might have been due solely to his reluctance to let her cause a scene, Tavaris finally stood, and did so under several pairs of watchful eyes. Unfortunately for him, Abraxas was conducting his annual tour of the Malfoy vineyards and therefore was not present to give him a commiserating look. With a clenched jaw, he followed Hermione into the bright, wide-windowed conservatory next.

His temper having been retained for all of the ten steps it took to get there, the second the doors were shut behind them, Tavaris rounded on her.

"What must be of such terrible importance that you'd thought it would *ever* be acceptable to *interrupt* —?"

"Why are those women still sucking up to me?" she asked, cutting him off. She was struggling to breathe.

Tavaris stared at her for a second, then scoffed in disbelief.

"This?" he said incredulously, in a low voice. "*This* is what was so important?"

"They have nothing to gain from it anymore!" Hermione said breathlessly, growing desperate. "*Why* do they still believe they have something to gain from it?"

Cursing, Tavaris drew his wand and waved it over the doors, creating a barrier of silence to prevent whatever eavesdropping was being eagerly enacted upon back in the lounge. When he turned back, he seemed to make a conscious effort to calm himself. He even sat down at the table with its white lace doily, as if sitting might help his restraint.

“You have been seeing these people regularly for weeks now,” he said, somewhat steadily, as she wrung her hands. “Why is it only today that their words are suddenly getting to you?”

Hermione could not answer this even if she wanted to. The sun, bleeding in through the windows, was much too bright. She began to pace, clutching her throat.

“I just don’t — I don’t understand —”

“Still? After all this time?” he said, his eyebrows shooting up. He shook his head slowly. “You are far too smart for this, Mione.”

She stopped pacing to glare at him.

“This extends beyond all their — their *whispering*,” he nearly spat, gritting his teeth. “Not all of them are in the know —”

“And yet Cecillia Greengrass remains all flattery,” she said, gesturing jerkily in the direction of the garden.

“Well, of course, she does! It is the unspoken rule established by my father nearly half a century ago with his creation of the Sacred Twenty-Eight,” Tavaris explained, taking on that same tone with which he explained things to Theodore, as if she, too, were a child. “He may have denied it but they all know it was him who sent that list out — *him* who decided who was pure and who was not. They will always seek to have you on their side, Mione, because *we decide*.”

That was not it, though, not entirely.

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest. “And why do you suppose they think that *we* includes me?” she said, in a thin voice. “Even the people who never had any association with the Death Eaters — they only began acting this way toward me after catching on to the fact that everyone else was! And *they* still act this way — as if they still think I have some sort of —” *power over you,* she did not say, breaking off. But Tavaris knew what she was getting at; she could see him tense as he tried to ignore it.

He rose to his feet, as though he could no longer stand to be looking up at her.

“Do not humiliate me like that again, especially not for no other reason than to ask a question you already know the answer to,” he said deliberately, his patience straining. “You must not forget; we have had this argument before. There is nothing productive about reliving it.”

“My intention is not to *relive* that argument — believe me, the memory of it is very much alive,” she snapped. Her chest heaved against her arms as she fumed. “But things are different now and —”

“How? How are they different?”

“Need I really say it?”

“Need I really explain it?” he retorted, taking a step toward her. “Here you are whinging —”

"*Whinging*?" she repeated furiously.

"— and yet the way *you* acted just now —" he gestured sharply to the doors behind him, his voice finally beginning to rise, "— is further evidence of the fact that you have never once attempted to dissuade them from their beliefs."

Hermione gaped at him.

"Is that what you think?"

"That is what I *know*."

"*You* — that's — *what does it matter if I have or have not*?" she blurted, in frustration, throwing her hands up. "Whatever power they were naïve enough to believe I held — whatever power they thought *Theodore* could possibly possess — is no longer relevant!"

"*Don't be ridiculous*," Tavaris sneered. "It will never cease to be relevant. How can you expect them to act any differently when you do not act any differently yourself?"

"What is *that* supposed to mean?" she demanded angrily.

"It means that any faith they have in that wretched rumour *was* and *is* shaky at best but you, with your persistent insolence, only continue to solidify it!"

"Oh, my *insolence* is the cause of this, is it?"

Scowling, Tavaris took another step, and without meaning to, she took her own step, moving back. His grip on the handle of his walking-stick had become a white-knuckled one.

"Do you know why anyone ever put any stock in that rumour in the first place?" he asked darkly. "It has never been because they have *truly* believed it; it is because they cannot be certain; it is because they fear what might happen to them if they are *wrong*."

"That does not change the fact that this should not *still* be happening, Tavaris! Not now!" *Not yet.*

"Why, because you say it should not?"

"*Because the Dark Lord is gone*!"

Hermione did not have the chance to regret these words before, with a whistle of force, the blow came rattling through the side of her head —

And for a split-second, there was a terror-filled nothing, no sliver of sight nor the slightest of sound —

And then she was colliding with the table, its clawed feet *screeching* against the floor, knocking into the pot of a venomous tentacula whose vines spasmed wrathfully and shot out to seize the table legs in retaliation, to lick at her ankles, out of reach.

She leaned unsteadily on the table, her ears ringing, and stared.

She had not seen it coming, and neither had Tavaris, by the way he stared back at her, his eyes wide and mouth agape, his walking-stick still poised to strike — and they were both fools for it, because the very last thing this should have been to either one of them was a shock.

Yet, for a moment, the only noise in the conservatory was that of their laboured breathing.

Then came out of nowhere a great, piercing *CRASH*.

Glass burst into the room, wild and without reason, shards flying at them and pouring down on the plants; she turned instinctively from the onslaught, her own scream splitting her ears once more —

As suddenly as it started, it stopped.

Hermione opened her eyes to find the shards frozen in mid-air, where they hovered for several breaths, caught in the evening's golden glow and interwoven by an intricate web of rainbow reflections.

The next second, Tavaris flicked his wand; all at once, the bright blizzard of glass collapsed with a cacophonous clatter, scattering and skidding across the shining marble floor.

She followed his stunned gaze, her head spinning.

The window nearest to where they had been standing a moment ago had been blown out.

She approached it with a wavering walk, glass *crunching* beneath her shoes, and peered beyond the large frame.

On the green grass a few feet below, Bedelia laid panting, her face a picture of pure shock. She was holding Theodore tightly in her arms, as though she had yanked him away at the last second.

"Oh, my God — *Theodore*!"

Without a second thought, Hermione leapt down through the empty frame, staggered forward, and dropped to her knees before the pair. She grasped Theodore's face, turning it from side to side to ensure he was unharmed.

He was staring at her in horror, shuddering.

"Are you alright? Does it hurt anywhere?" she asked frantically. Her eyes darted up to Bedelia. "Is he alright?"

Bedelia's nod was stilted.

"The glass went the other way," she replied dumbly. She may as well have whispered it.

The others soon swarmed this small section of the garden, summoned by the commotion; they surrounded them, their voices high and alarmed and their wands drawn.

“My word!” Jillian Goyle gasped, as Cecillia Greengrass pressed her hand to her parted lips and Narcissa stepped back, clutching Draco’s shoulders. “What in Merlin’s name —?”

The men flooded outside behind them, each one of their wands raised as if they, too, had expected a threat —

“We heard a crash —”

“— thought there was an explosion —”

“— nasty scratch there, Lady Nott —”

“What happened?” demanded Aurelia, aghast, holding tight to a squirming Pansy’s wrist.

No explanation came to Hermione. Her brain could not quickly enough compute all of what had occurred in the last minute. Behind her, Tavaris remained unhelpfully silent.

“Ac—accidental magic,” Bedelia answered finally, without tearing her eyes from Hermione’s face. Her voice was halting. “Theodore saw his parents … through the window. I suppose he was hoping to catch their attention.”

“That’s one way to do it,” Garfield Goyle said gruffly.

“Goodness me, but the whole window?” said Annora Bulstrode, with what appeared to be mingled horror and amazement; her face was too blurry to tell for certain. “At his age?”

The Crabbes exchanged a significant look.

Errett Greengrass let out a low whistle.

“Incredible,” he muttered, sliding his hands into his trouser pockets. “Daphne has managed on more than one occasion to resist having her hair done by Transfiguring her ribbons into banana peels but … we have seen nothing of this scale as of yet.”

Hermione scooped Theodore up in her arms and heaved herself dizzily to her feet. He clung to her neck, burying his face in her hair. For a second, she thought she might tip over. She placed a hand on the back of his head, wishing they would all stop looking at him.

“Pansy began unlocking doors a few months ago,” said Presleigh Parkinson, “and I thought that was significant.”

“This was an Exploding Charm at most,” said Hermione dismissively. “A broken window is nothing.”

Drustan Bulstrode raised his bushy eyebrows. “Nothing?”

“I knew a child who both Vanished glass and replaced it.”

“At two?”

Aurelia whispered something rapidly to Gaspar, who in turn gave his sister a sharp glare. Daphne was peering out at the scene from behind the latter’s legs; when she started creeping forward, Gaspar caught her and picked her up. Lucius then came forth, lifting his wand again, and with a flourish, the window began to repair itself, summoning back each shard a few at a time.

“Such achievements used to be common among children,” said Landon Crabbe informatively, as he watched, scratching his large chin, “but this was several generations ago, of course.”

And that, Hermione thought, was the reason for their astonishment, though they would never have known it themselves.

New blood.

When, at last, the window had been restored, Hermione glanced back at Tavaris, who had not moved the whole time, unable as he was to make the same leap she had. He was watching her though the glass, frowning deeply.

Dinner was delayed due to all the excitement; by the time everyone was sitting down to eat, the children were restless.

Pansy decided that she no longer knew how to sit on a chair and only ate once her father let her sit on his lap; Vincent Crabbe, particularly averse to the use of cutlery, nearly put his fork in a three-hundred-year-old portrait of Fridolph Nott III; Daphne Greengrass took her shoes off under the table and was made by her mother to put them back on a total of five times; and Draco kept throwing his peas at Gaspar, who received a smack upside the head from Aurelia for throwing them back whenever Lucius and Narcissa weren’t looking. Meanwhile, Gregory Goyle — having been yelled at by his father for permitting the girls to put flowers in his hair — wailed so loudly that he was sent away with the Goyles’ house-elf, Cranky, not halfway through the meal. Not long later, the Bulstrodes’ elf, Una, came to collect Millicent, who had fallen asleep with her face flat on her plate of gravy-coated roast beef.

Throughout the entire wearisome ordeal, Tavaris was silent, and so was his son.

It was moments such as these, when their similarities were so eerily plain, in which Hermione was most confounded that people could ever doubt Theodore belonged to him. For he, as Tavaris had often done, waited until they were at home, alone, to say what had for hours been on his mind.

“Was it me that hurted your face, Ma?” he asked in a small, devasted voice.

Hermione’s gaze lifted from *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* to find him, curled up in his bed and guarded both by the stuffed Short-Snout in his arms and by Crookshanks at his feet.

“Oh, *Theodore* — Theodore, my Theodore — of course not, my love,” she said hurriedly, putting the book aside without marking the page. She sat forward on the armchair to squeeze

his arm through the blankets. “I know you would never …” Her throat felt suddenly tight. “You would never mean to hurt me.”

Holding her gaze, he then asked, “Did Pa mean to?”

The look on his face pained her, so sad yet so confused.

“It was Pa who healed me,” she said, after a second. “See?”

She touched her cheek, where, earlier, the skin had been torn; everyone had presumed it a result of the smashed window.

“It’s all gone now — as if it never even happened.”

Theodore gazed at her a moment longer, then rolled over, putting his back to her. He did not answer when she said his name, and eventually, she thought he had fallen asleep, until he spoke again.

“Ma?”

“Yes, my love?”

“When Pa was on’y big as me, an’ he leaved his toys on uh f’oor, did his ma tell him to c’ean up his mess, too?”

Even three hours later, when Remus opened his front door, Hermione still had no answer to that question.

It was approaching midnight, and the world had long gone dark; the sky was too riddled with clouds for even the light of the brightest star or the strongest satellite to shine through, and the silent street was bathed in still shadows untouched by the glow of the nearest lamppost or the buzzing flicker of the corner shop’s dying neon sign. It must have been obvious that something was horribly wrong, for at once Remus asked in a panic, “Are you alright?”

Hermione tried for a deep breath, failed, and promptly folded, her face falling. She moved without thinking, without really seeing, and she did not stop until her head was hitting his chest and his arms were lifting to hold her to it.

“What’s happened? Are you hurt?”

She wept into his jumper, clutching the wearing fabric at his sides, and only shook her head. He held her tighter.

When he next spoke, his voice had solidified, as had his stance.

“You’ll stay here tonight. We’ll argue about it in the morning.”

Perhaps they would, she thought distantly, but as for right now, she had no interest in even attempting to refuse. She nodded, and he brought her inside. Upstairs within the darkened flat, he took her coat and led her into the one room she had yet to enter. There, he lit a lamp,

rummaged through a rickety chest of drawers for an old Led Zeppelin band t-shirt, thick woollen socks, and a pair of baggy pants, placed them all on the sagging mattress, and went to put the kettle on.

Hermione changed numbly into the clothes, leaving her own on the seat of a spindly chair that had been shoved in the corner between the chest of drawers and a small bedside table, which had on it the lamp, a clock, his brown-leather wristwatch, and a book titled *Grendel* by someone named John Gardner. The floorboards *creaked* beneath her bare feet as she went to sit on the edge of the bed to pull on the socks.

“Remus,” she called after him, “if you haven’t done already, please don’t bother with the kettle. I don’t need tea.”

He appeared after a few moments to hover at the threshold of the bedroom, at a clear loss.

“Then what *do* you need, Mione?”

She only gazed at him, hoping he would understand.

“Ah,” said Remus at last, softly.

With some hesitation, he entered. He placed her cedar wand on the bedside table and sat down next to her, the mattress sinking, sliding her closer.

“I suppose you won’t tell me what brought you here tonight?”

“You may think you want to know,” she said with a sniffle, wiping under her eyes with the back of her wrist, “but trust me when I say it will not help you any.”

“Is that meant to be comforting?” he asked, a tinge of something sour in his voice.

“It’s meant to be honest.”

“Imagining it is little better, Mione.”

“Even so, knowing is not the same comfort I once thought it was,” said Hermione, exhausted. “Bliss, in this case, can only be found in ignorance.”

He released a long sigh; it sounded as though he had been stifling it for some time.

“We’ll talk in the morning,” he decided aloud, and he seemed to be telling himself this rather than her. “Perhaps you’ll feel better then. Get some sleep — I’ll be just out there on the sofa, all right?” he added, rising.

The blankets were already drawn back, as if he had been about to go to sleep when he had heard her voice on the intercom. Guiltily, she turned and crawled up the bed, which fit squarely in a sort of alcove between the wall and a closet with slim shingled doors. She laid down on the right side, below a street-facing window with slanted blinds.

But the sight of him in the doorway kept her from relaxing.

“It isn’t necessary,” she said, in a high, thready voice, before he could go. “And — and it won’t be good for your back, surely.”

It was a lame excuse.

“Don’t worry about me,” Remus replied, not catching it. “Keep the bed. I’ll be perfectly fine on the sofa.”

“Remus, really …” She tried to appear something other than scared as she patted the space beside her. “I don’t care.”

His lips parted. He shifted his weight, teetering with indecision.

He would not deny her this, though, she felt certain, nor would he deny himself when she was the one offering. Sure enough, he placed his wand alongside her own and joined her, gingerly, on the bed. He laid back on the left, drawing the blankets up over them both.

At once, Hermione moved closer; he lifted his arm to allow her to lay her head down on his chest, directly over his heart.

Only then did she relax.

Remus, on the other hand, remained tense. It took several seconds for him to lower his arm, at which point he seemed to struggle to decide what to do with his hand. Eventually, he settled with leaving it on her back. When, with his other hand, he reached toward the lamp, she piped up to request that he leave it lit.

She fisted the side of his jumper once more, shutting her eyes.

“What time is it?” she murmured.

“A few minutes to … to midnight …” His voice fettered out.

And then she felt him turn over her arm, heard his sharp intake of breath, the sudden spike of his heart — yet, at that moment, it mattered very little to her what he saw on her skin.

“Don’t ask me about my scars and I won’t ask you about yours.”

So Remus did not ask. The tension never left his body for as long as Hermione remained awake. But it was true: she did not care. She could not afford to, not after today.

All she could let herself care about, as nearer came the day’s end, was the heart beating beneath her ear. In exactly sixteen years’ time, it would stop. But for now — and it was the now that mattered most just then — on it beat, and on she listened.

Thump, thump. Thump, thump. Thump, thump.

*

The day dawned early, its light filtering in through the slits in the blinds to trickle over the bed, a gentle *pitter-patter* reaching the two of them through the recesses of sleep.

And then it was awkward, though the pair pretended it was not. Through the motions they went, with little conversation: get up, take turns in the bathroom, put the kettle on, pop the toast, and pay the owl for the *Prophet*.

At roughly half-eight came the buzz of the intercom, followed by a staticky male voice, speaking low.

"*Too many Muggles about, come open the door*."

Remus swore under his breath. Hastily, he took off his jumper and tossed it at Hermione.

"Put that on — quick!"

"Is that your father at the door?" she asked in alarm.

He barely had time to give her a nod before Lyall Lupin's voice sounded again ("*You're not still sleeping, are you*?"), effectively urging him from the kitchen and out the door. Hurriedly, she pulled the jumper on over her head and yanked down the sleeves. Too soon, she heard two sets of feet on the stairs. Should she hide?

There was no time left to decide; Mr Lupin was in the hallway now, a slick rustling as he removed his rain-sodden coat, a *thud* as he set down his boots. He was whinging about the weather, denying Remus any opportunity to interrupt, though it sounded like he was trying.

"Now, have you got the kettle on yet?"

"Yes, but —"

"I cannot go catching myself a cold this week, I'm flat out of Pepper-Up as it is."

"I have a bit left if you need, but —"

"No, don't waste that, a cuppa will suffice in staving off —"

Mr Lupin froze.

Hermione stared back at him nervously from the kitchen table, cupping her mug of tea.

"Good morning, Mr Lupin," she tried, quite unreadily.

"Did I — er — mention Mione was here?" said Remus tensely.

For nearly a minute, Mr Lupin stared whilst the two of them waited anxiously for him to react. Then he turned to his son.

"You idiot."

Remus winced.

“How long has this been going on?” Mr Lupin asked, and when Remus’ response started with a stammer, he shook his head and cut him off. “No, don’t tell me, I’d rather remain ignorant.”

“It’s my fault, sir,” Hermione interjected, but he shook his head again, not having it.

“You are *both* idiots,” he said bluntly.

She sat back, biting down on her cheek. Her face burned.

“Why are you here, Dad?” Remus asked, in a gallant attempt to redirect his father’s attention. “Has something come up?”

Mr Lupin glanced at him, then at Hermione, then shook his head a third time and sighed.

“I’m afraid something has,” he said, as he joined the latter in sitting stiffly at the table. “But we shall have to discuss it later, after your … friend has left. Now, about that cuppa —”

“What is it?” At his father’s look, Remus rolled his eyes and went to fix a third cup of tea. He tried again as he poured the milk. “Has it anything to do with next weekend?”

Mr Lupin gave a short grunt of confirmation. He nodded in thanks as Remus handed him his tea.

“You can say it now, then,” Remus told him, sitting down. “She already knows.”

Mr Lupin put down his tea without taking a sip.

“*Knows*?” he breathed, in horror.

Only then did Hermione realise the significance of next weekend: it would be the full moon.

“He didn’t tell me,” she said quickly. “I sorted it out for myself.”

“That’s hardly any better, though, is it, Mrs Nott?” said Mr Lupin, and both she and Remus winced. “Does your husband know?”

The pair exchanged a look.

“Not from me,” she said.

Mr Lupin was appalled. He sat forward, elbows on the table.

“From Black, then, which — *I shall repeat* — is hardly any better,” he said severely, glancing between them. “Do not give me that look, Remus, you should never have let him find out in the first place. Your mother and I worked tirelessly to maintain your secret —”

“I *know*, Dad.”

“— and for what? Who knows how many people are now aware of your condition!”

Hermione could probably make a fairly accurate estimate, but she doubted this information would be helpful just then.

“How can you fail to understand the severity of the position you have placed yourself in?” Mr Lupin continued, looking more and more aggrieved. “For Merlin’s sake, Remus, Tavaris Nott sits on the Wizengamot!”

“I realise that, Dad,” said Remus, with straining patience, “but what do you expect me to do about it?”

Rather than answer, Mr Lupin returned his gaze to Hermione.

“Does he know about *this*, too?” he asked, gesturing around them at the flat.

“No.” She shook her head. “I would know if he did.”

“Are you certain about that?” he pressed.

“Believe me, sir,” she said coldly, “*I would know*.”

Especially after yesterday. If Tavaris ever had an inkling as to where she had been going every week, there would be no missing it.

After a moment, Mr Lupin sat back, his mouth a flat line of displeasure. Remus stared at his tea, his shoulders fraught with tension.

“Very well, then.” Mr Lupin took a sip of his tea, sighed, then, to Remus, said, “I have been called upon by the Wizengamot to consult on a case that’s up for review. The session is scheduled for Saturday at three o’clock. It is unclear how long it will run — too many people from the Spirit Division are set to speak prior to myself.”

Remus frowned and glanced up at him.

“Will you make it back in time?”

“I don’t know, Remus. That’s why I’m here.”

“But surely the session will not go so late,” he said worriedly. “None of that lot will wish to spend their Saturday evenings stuck in court proceedings.”

“*I don’t know*, Remus,” Mr Lupin repeated. “The discourse over this case has been scarce but, nevertheless, Wymond Selwyn can be certain to have no plans and he gets a kick out of filibustering.”

Hermione scoffed in exasperated agreement, then averted her gaze, because she was not supposed to be able to agree on that.

Remus put his elbows on the table and his head in his hands. He was still being locked up at his parents’ house each month, it would seem. She had wondered. She took a bite of her toast, not wanting to intrude, but the *crunch* was too loud; she stuck to tea.

“Do you know when it’s set to rise?” he asked, shoving his fingers through his short hair.

“Not till quite late but you know we cannot run that risk. Remus,” Mr Lupin said seriously, sitting forward again, “if the department obtains their desired outcome, Belinda Brown and her team are certain to invite me out after as thanks. She always has the tickets to the Bard at the ready, though she won’t ever say so until she gets her results.”

“Can’t you decline?”

“I could. But to tell the people from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures that I’ve a prior engagement on the night of a full moon?” said Mr Lupin, lifting his eyebrows. “It won’t look very good to them, will it?”

Definitely not, thought Hermione grimly. No matter the division, anyone who worked in that department was forced to become familiar with the lunar cycle. A specialised clock Bewitched to track it hung on the wall in front of the lifts.

“What am I to do on Saturday, then?”

“What did you do when I wasn’t there?”

Remus broke his father’s gaze, shifting in discomfort.

“Well —” he cleared his throat, “— no — er — arrangements were made, exactly.”

Mr Lupin inhaled deeply, his nostrils flaring.

“And by that, you mean …”

“I was never unsafe,” Remus assured him quickly. “Everywhere I went, we steered clear of populated areas. Most packs settle someplace deep in a forest, as far from the nearest town as possible.”

“Most packs,” Mr Lupin conceded, inclining his head. “But you were not with *most packs*, were you?”

“Can we table this discussion, please?” Remus asked tightly.

“No, we cannot, Remus, not until we have a concrete plan as to what you are going to do on Saturday night if I am not back. And *running rampant* in the woods is not a plan.”

Hermione finally decided to pipe up.

“I could help.”

Remus and his father both appeared equally sceptical.

“Really,” she said. “Tavaris will be at the Ministry with you, Mr Lupin; he will not know I’ve gone until I have already come back. And in the morning, it will not matter because you’ll be there. I can do it.”

“No,” said Remus immediately.

“But I *can*!” she insisted. “And if it’s the Knight Bus that worries you, I can get off at whatever town you tell me and go the rest of the way on foot, all I need are direct—”

“The answer is no, Mione.”

“Can’t you Apparate?” asked Mr Lupin, with a frown.

“She hasn’t got a licence, Dad.”

“I — I *can* Apparate, though,” Hermione said. “There’s merely no documentation of it.”

“Well, if that isn’t the cleverest way I’ve heard someone say *illegal*,” said Mr Lupin, but he looked amused. “Do you think you could make it from Nottinghamshire to Monmouthshire?”

Remus gaped at him incredulously.

“I would be leaving from London, actually, but I have done greater distances than that before —”

“When was the last time you Apparated, Mione?” Remus cut in, a bit harshly. “And Side-Along doesn’t count.”

“So it’s been a few years,” she admitted, huffing, “what of it?”

“All you need is a spot of practice, then,” said Mr Lupin definitively, his face set. “Have you got plans today?”

“*Dad*.”

But despite Remus’ ensuing protests, by the time the rain had stopped, Hermione was landing on the dewy green grass of a small field in south-east Wales.

At once, she hunched over with her hands on her knees, panting. Sweat trickled down her spine like beads of thawing ice. She closed her eyes for a moment as she caught her breath.

“*He’s not here*,” she muttered to herself. “*He’s not here*.”

“Nearly on the mark this time!” she heard Mr Lupin shout from somewhere behind her. Her ears were ringing.

“He’s not here,” she reminded herself again, and she opened her eyes. Unsteadily, she straightened and turned.

Some fifty yards away stood the Lupins’ two-storeyed Georgian cottage, built seemingly on a slant and teetering slightly atop a grassy incline. From this distance, the weathered stone exterior appeared the same bright shade of pearly grey as the clearing sky above it. A couple of broomsticks were propped upright by the back door, between the windows with their untended flower boxes. On the edge of the small back deck sat Remus, watching over the top

of the *Prophet* and — though she couldn't make out his expression, she was sure — frowning.

Roughly a metre in front of him stood Mr Lupin with his arms folded, his wand out and aimed safely at the ground.

"What is that?" he shouted. "Two feet or so?"

Hermione glanced behind her at the young, spindly-looking birch tree, which was indeed about two feet away. She nodded to Mr Lupin, who then gestured for her to go again.

Intently, she recalled the three "D"s of Apparation; with a firm grasp on her wand, she spun on the spot and promptly disappeared into the winding dark.

Destination … She pictured the Lupins' back deck, her eyes squeezed tightly shut … *Determination* … She felt as though she were soaring, spinning violently through a pitch-black sky … *Deliberation* … Something cold and wet was clamped over her mouth, stopping her breath from escaping, stopping her from screaming —

Light flooded blindingly into sight, and her feet hit the ground hard; she stumbled forward onto the low stone deck, catching herself on her hands. Greedily, she gulped down air.

"Much more precise. We'll worry about regrowing that eyebrow later," Mr Lupin said, his voice much closer now. "It's your landing that needs work. I think you may be having difficulty remembering the fourth 'D' of Apparation."

"There is no *fourth 'D'* of Appa—Apparation," she managed to pant, her chest heaving.

"Of course, there is. Destination, Determination, Deliberation, and *Distraction*."

Hermione hid a scoff beneath her breath. She sat down where she had landed and rolled her shoulders back. Her heart was hammering painfully against her skull, as if a team of tiny creatures had replaced her brain with it and started up a game of Quidditch, tossing it back and forth like a Quaffle.

"Your spin is excellently executed but as soon as we lose sight of you the trouble begins," Mr Lupin said, regarding her shrewdly. "What's distracting you?"

"I keep thinking of flying," she answered truthfully.

Remus glanced at her in surprise.

"You fly?"

"Not really, no."

"I have more often heard the sensation of Apparating be compared to that of travelling through the Floo," said Mr Lupin. "But is it that which reminds you of flying?"

"I suppose."

Remus let out a sudden sigh, heavy enough to draw their attention. He had gone back to the *Prophet* and his lips were now twisted in a tight grimace.

"What is it?"

"Winifred Crouch died last night," he said.

Hermione's heart sank. Since January, she had been checking, waiting for it to happen, yet the one day she did not search headlines and obituaries, it had.

"Of what?" she asked.

Remus' expression was grim. "She was ill for years, apparently," he said. "According to this, it was only a matter of time; she had been at death's door ever since her son went to Azkaban."

Goosebumps broke out across her skin.

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Mr Lupin, subdued. "She was an abnormally kind woman. When is the funeral?"

Remus looked back at the article.

"It doesn't say, just that '*the Crouch family asks for privacy at this time*.' But …" He frowned, disquieted. He shot Hermione an inscrutable look. "Barty Crouch Jr died yesterday, too. Only a few hours before her. He was buried at Azkaban."

Mr Lupin shook his head sadly.

"The last straw for his poor mother, no doubt."

Hermione gazed at her knees and said nothing. She knew Barty was not dead. Although his body was the one buried on that dreadful island in the middle of the North Sea, he was not the one inside of it. In fulfilment of his mother's dying wish, he had been brought home by his father — only not quite in the sense that Winifred had intended.

For Barty remained a prisoner, just one of another kind.

"Shall we continue?" she said after a minute, in a thick voice.

"You needn't do this, you know," Remus told her quietly.

"But I do," she replied, as she double-checked the secureness of the buckles on her shoes. "If not for you, Remus, then for myself."

"To the birch again, then," said Mr Lupin, as she got to her feet. "Remember, you are aiming to land a metre beyond it."

She nodded determinedly.

Remus tossed the paper aside with another sigh. He leaned back on his hands with his legs outstretched on the ground below, crossed at the ankles.

“Whenever you’re ready,” said Mr Lupin.

Hermione counted down in her head, tightening her hold on her wand — *Three, two, one* — and spun herself into the black abyss.

An hour later, she was landing not on grass, but on gravel, and straightening up under the squirming barred shadow of the Nott Estate’s wrought-iron fence. The metal was cool against her palm as she dragged open one gate and heaved it closed again, shutting herself inside. Resignedly, she started toward the house.

Up ahead, the front doors were thrown open; Theodore came racing out, a troubling sight until he surpassed the challenge of the stone steps and continued, at full speed, down the drive to meet her.

“*Ma*! *You’re back*!”

She caught him as he came barrelling into her, swung him up into her arms to hold him close, and so very tightly he clung back. She buried her nose in his hair, breathing deeply.

“Oh, Theodore, my Theodore,” she murmured against his temple, pressing a kiss there, “I will always come back to you, my love.”

When she lifted her gaze, she saw Tavaris sitting down on the steps. He was still in his robes from the day before.

“We was so sca’ed, Ma,” Theodore mumbled into the crook of her neck. “I thought you was gonna go away like Mun-mun — or like Rod-fuss an’ Stan an’ Gus an’ Batty.”

“No, my love,” she said, kissing him again, and she caught herself, heart clenching, before she accidentally added, *Never.*

Theodore raised his head to look at her intensely.

“Pa’s ne’er gonna do it again, ‘kay?” he said. “He p’omised.”

She swallowed thickly and did not say anything. Shifting him to her hip, she walked on until she reached the steps, where she halted and held out her wand.

Tavaris did not immediately take it.

“I should not have done that,” he said quietly.

“No, you shouldn’t have,” she agreed coolly.

“It will not happen again, Mione.”

“Of course not, Tavaris,” she said, not believing it for a second.

His gaze dropped to her wand. Without a word, he took it and tucked it away in his robes. He then glanced behind her, his eyes narrowing slightly.

“Did you take the Knight Bus?”

“No,” said Hermione. “I Apparated.”

And she relished the look that he gave her then, like he was remembering that in this game of tug of war, each time he yanked, no matter how much ground he gained, she was still going to yank back.

It should have been strange that each day of the following week, filled with tentative interaction and maintained through strategic silences, proved less wearing than the last. But this was how it worked; a memory slowly but not painstakingly discarded, not forgotten but without a doubt put aside. It was easier this way, for everyone.

Sooner than seemed possible, it was Saturday. Hermione spent the morning and most of the afternoon lying in wait, and Tavaris, out of sight. Only twenty minutes till he was scheduled to be at the Ministry did he appear in the sitting room, wearing his plum-coloured Wizengamot robes and struggling one-handedly with the clasp of his brown leather briefcase.

“I’m behind schedule,” he said shortly, and he nodded to the *Prophet* laying open on her lap. “Anything I ought to know?”

“Not particularly,” she sighed, looking back down at the article she had been reading. “Oswald Macmillan was quoted saying flying carpets were ‘*a touch too foreign, anyway*,’ which is problematic, to say the least, and Hogwarts is out another Defence Against the Dark Arts professor — tax evasion, this time.” She pursed her lips reprovingly. “Honestly, there are only so many people in the British wizarding community — how does Professor Dumbledore consistently manage to find someone with the right credentials to fill the position?”

He’ll run out of options eventually, I suppose, she thought grimly; that was how they would be landed with Dolores Umbridge in 1995.

After a moment, Hermione realised that Tavaris had not moved. She looked up, and immediately, she tensed.

His face had drained of colour. He was staring at her, his lips parted, his body frozen in the archway.

“Tavaris?” she prompted tentatively.

“Pa?” Theodore tried, gazing up at him worriedly from the rug where he had been playing with his letter blocks. “What happens?”

Tavaris did not seem to hear either one of them. She doubted he had even blinked. She glanced at Theodore, then stood from the sofa and approached, slowly so as to avoid startling.

“What is it?” she asked Tavaris in an undertone.

At last, he did blink; his eyes flitted away.

“I … I need to verify something,” he muttered distractedly, and he turned on the spot and walked back out.

“Stay here, I shall be right back,” Hermione told Theodore strictly, before catching up with Tavaris in the hall.

His stride was smooth, but not from any apparent confidence; rather, from a sense of being adrift, plunged so deeply in thought that his feet moved on muscle memory alone.

“What’s going on?” she asked, in concern. “What have you just realised?”

He did not answer. She followed him into the study, then through the bookcase passageway and up the narrow, turning stairwell, her apprehension growing. At the top of the stairs, she paused, her own feet suddenly stuck to the spot.

Tavaris continued past the round table, where no chessboard lay waiting, and across the green-carpeted floor, where no pieces were scattered. He disappeared into the cluttered stacks.

There was a small gasp behind her. Hermione glanced over her shoulder, then promptly lowered her gaze to discover Theodore there, clearly having followed them. His mouth was agape and his eyes, wide with awe, were crawling over all he could see of the small library. Crookshanks darted up the steps past them both.

“Theodore — just — *stay here*,” she said hastily, frustrated. “And don’t touch anything.”

He made no sign of having heard her; his attention was now fixed firmly upon the display of swords above his head.

Huffing, she continued after Tavaris, whom she found at the end of the second aisle, pulling books frantically off the shelves, glancing at them, and shoving them back, all the while cursing under his breath. His walking-stick lay discarded a foot away.

She glanced at the collection of old clocks that hung in a line down the wall, each one displaying a different time zone.

“The session starts in nine minutes —”

A weak noise escaped him, like that of an injured animal.

She stepped aside quickly, alarmed, as he staggered single-mindedly back out the aisle, nearly tripping over one of the teetering stacks on the floor; the books came cascading down with a series of *thuds* and a fluttering of a thousand pages.

What was he looking for, she wondered, and why with such desperation? She tried hurriedly to think of what might have set him off, sparking this inane crusade that somehow took

precedence over even a meeting of the Wizengamot at a time when appearances remained so significantly an ongoing issue. When he had frozen up, what had she been talking about?

And then she understood.

With greater caution than before, Hermione met him in the next aisle. She held on to the shelf for support, forcing herself to swallow; her mouth had gone very dry. She licked her lips.

"Tavaris —"

"What's this book, Ma?"

She jumped.

"For heaven's sake!" she said breathlessly, clutching her chest. "Theodore —" She glanced at him, her eyes widening. "I thought I told you not to touch anything!"

She confiscated the slim, leather-bound journal from his hands, and as she did, a folded bit of yellowed parchment fell out. Huffing again, she bent to retrieve it.

"Some of these books are *dangerous*, Theodore, they mustn't be handled by anyone who's not an ad—"

"*Stop*," said Tavaris suddenly, his voice cracking.

She froze.

"Give me that." When she did not immediately move, he held out his hand impatiently and snapped, "*The journal*, give it to me!"

The second she was within arm's reach, he tore it from her grasp. She took several steps back and tugged Theodore to her side.

Together, they watched Tavaris flip through the pages until, roughly in the middle, he stopped; his eyes darted back and forth across the page, his breath growing heavier and heavier still. Finally, he found it; with a faint noise of shock, he backed into the wall and sank laboriously to the floor.

Hermione looked down at the parchment which had fallen from the journal, now crumpling in her tensed fist. She unfolded it.

It was a copy of what appeared to be a contract, though where the signatures ought to have been it was blank. At the top was the Hogwarts crest, and below it read: *Position: Professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts.*

She blew out a long, wavering breath. Then she approached.

The journal had fallen from Tavaris' slackened grasp. Keeping an eye on him in case he made a sudden move to stop her, she picked it up. The name on the inside cover told her it had belonged to Cantankerus. About halfway through, there was a page missing, torn straight

from the binding and leaving only a jagged strip to remember it by. She scanned the preceding page.

but generational curses must not be founded through blood alone, as may be gleaned by a study of the Greengrass line; their curse does not leap from one branch to another, and never to a new tree entirely. Although it befell Corrina Bulstrode, born a Greengrass, in 1895, no remnants of the curse can be found among the Bulstrodes of today. Thus, there is this phenomenon of the generational blood curse, which must be based not only in blood but in name. By this my theory is proven: if a name may be cursed, as may a title. And even the most menial of job positions have their titles: receptionist, clerk, bookkeeper… whatever we refer to them as in practice, their contracts contain a formal title.

The key question to now consider is how the blood component of the curse will come into play. Who's blood must be used? Need it be specific or might the blood of any Mudblood work as though they all descend from a singular line? Perhaps it is not the Mudblood that need be used at all in preventing one from taking the position. What if, with blood, the position is forever fixed as filled? That is to say, the magical contract is fixed to recognise only one signature as

The rest of Cantankerus' sentence was gone, having continued onto the missing page. On the following page, however, was the end of another sentence, which must have begun on that same page made forever unreadable.

and released upon death.

This was the confirmation for which Tavaris had been searching.

The curse believed for decades to have been set upon the Defence Against the Dark Arts position at Hogwarts, befalling all who took the post, was no rumour nor conspiracy; it was the reality.

This fact had become known to all in the years following the second wizarding war, when the Dark Lord had been well and truly gone from the world. The post had been taken in 1999 by a wizard named Sean Beaton — a scrawny and scruffy-looking Muggle-born who had models of aeroplanes and fighter jets floating round his classroom and who moved as if he always had a case of the jitters — and Professor Beaton had still been there to give James Sirius detention for setting a Dungbomb off in class to avoid a quiz in 2020.

Because the Dark Lord had, indeed, been dead.

He may have been gone now, here in 1982, but Hogwarts was still out another Defence Against the Dark Arts professor. It only meant one thing: he was not dead.

Hermione had known it. Now Tavaris knew it, too.

As she shut the journal, gently, and set it and the crumpled contract aside, she thought of Harry's recounting of that night in the graveyard of Little Hangleton in 1995. The Death Eater called Nott had been among those who were accused and promptly punished for never attempting to seek out their master. It had made sense when she had heard it first; it was fear that had kept him and the others from finding the Dark Lord. But now she knew better — now she knew him, and she knew that fear had nothing to do with it.

To aid the Heir of Slytherin was more than his life's ambition; it was his perceived familial duty, the honour and responsibility of his bloodline dating back some nine-hundred centuries, when a Nott first stepped foot on English soil and befriended Salazar Slytherin himself. Yet Tavaris had not sought the Dark Lord out.

Therefore, he could not.

Hermione willed her heart to calm and crouched down before him. Then she thought smarter, and knelt. She took his face — dazed, clammy, and white — into her hands.

"Tavaris," she said, "do you like your life?"

His gaze, glazed, found her own.

"Do you like being able to do what you want with it?" she continued, in a voice anchored by determination. "Do you like being the only one who decides what goes on in your house? Who decides what happens to the people who live in it?"

At this, his eyes focused; his mouth, dangling open, shut.

"Do you like not having to share those people?"

He did not answer. But she knew; out of all that had happened, the good, the bad, and the extreme worse, she knew what had been the hardest for him to swallow. He struggled with it still, stuck forever in his throat; it was why her head ached slightly even now.

"When one of us is gone from this world," she told him clearly, "your ring —" she twitched her finger, letting him feel that ring against his cheek, "— *your mark* — will no longer be a part of me. But even in death his mark will remain. So I ask you: do you like the idea of someone else owning what's yours again?"

And his jaw clenched, teeth beginning to grind. She did not break his gaze to see but sensed, nonetheless, the way his body tensed; she had seconds, if that, before he would move.

One last question, she asked him, to really seal the deal.

"Do you like the sound of your son's voice?"

Tavaris straightened and drew her hands from his face. He held her wrists tightly, too tightly, and lifted his chin.

“What, precisely, are you proposing?” he asked in a low voice.

“If he could come back on his own, he would have done it by now,” said Hermione. “For all intents and purposes, he’s gone. You have done your grieving. You have gone on living. *Keep* living.”

It was the shortest-lived argument the two of them had ever had and perhaps ever would have, and it was, thus far, the only one from which a clear winner emerged.

Tavaris got up off the floor, fixed his robes, and went to work.

And in his absence, Hermione left to lock a door.

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully this chapter was not too tragic?

Also, the book on Remus’ bedside table, ‘Grendel’ by John Gardner, is essentially a nihilistic and existentialist retelling of an Old English poem (‘Beowulf’) in the perspective of the monster.

Lady Mione's Academy for Over-Privileged Children

Chapter Summary

> Finally something
> Finally news
> About how the story ends
> — Drift Away Omnichord, Mars Bars

Chapter Notes

> CW: Minor Character Death (of an OC), someone you wish would stay in her portrait, and ... that's it for now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was to the sound of the static voices emitting from the television that Hermione woke, her eyes fluttering as they adjusted to the light and her head heavy on the thin shoulder of the man beside her.

"… *mass rally yesterday in Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, as hundreds more of the country's miners join the strike in protest of Prime Minister Thatcher's plans for pit closures* …"

She lifted her head, rubbing her eyes. Sunlight bled in through the open window, accompanied by the cool breezes of late March. Distantly, she could hear what those winds were doing to the river.

"And to think, public opinion of her had actually improved," Remus muttered, unimpressed. He had a book open on his lap: a battered copy of George Orwell's *1984*.

"… *expected to result in roughly twenty-thousand job losses — a hard hit for numerous communities*," the broadcaster continued, "*with unemployment rates already at a high and continuing to climb*."

"What time is it?" Hermione asked in a sleep-roughened voice.

"Just past two. I can't watch this anymore." He got up from the sofa, his knees cracking, and went to shut off the television. Looking back at her, he said, incredulous, "Can you believe bread is now going for about forty-five pence a loaf? *Forty-five pence*. For a loaf of bread!"

"I can believe it."

“Even in the wizarding world, costs are skyrocketing,” he continued, picking their empty cups of tea from that morning off the coffee table, “and Bagnold is doing nothing about it, either.”

He disappeared into the kitchen.

“In all likelihood, Bagnold is doing everything she can,” said Hermione, with a surge of defensiveness, as she stretched. “The public needs someone to blame — it always has and always will — and when one is head of it … well …”

She tucked her hair, in need of a trim, behind her ears and reached for the book she had left on the coffee table — or that Remus had. She thought she might have fallen asleep with it on her lap. Her blue ballpoint pen, too, had been set aside for her.

“Minchum was fortunate, in a rather twisted way,” she said, raising her voice so that Remus could hear her over the sound of him doing the washing. “When he was in office, there was someone else to blame for everything that was going wrong.”

“You-Know-Who?” Remus shouted back, and she thought he must have scoffed, though she couldn’t make it out over the running faucet. “I would argue that garnered twice the blame. People looked to the government for help, and when the help wasn’t there, were they to say that was You-Know-Who’s fault?”

Hermione frowned and glanced over her shoulder into the kitchen, where Remus stood at the sink with his back to her.

“Are you washing those by hand?”

He stilled. She grabbed her cedar wand off the coffee table, then joined him in the kitchen, where she set her pen and book — *A History of Magic* by Bathilda Bagshot — on the worn wooden table.

“I suppose I’ve become rather accustomed to it,” Remus confessed, with a tight-lipped smile. “Although just last week, Dierdre had a new dishwasher put in — this massive industrial thing.”

He dried his hands with a rag, meanwhile Hermione aimed her wand at the sink to Charm the dishes to start scrubbing themselves clean the way Molly Weasley had taught her.

“It’s only two minutes a load — a feat I previously hadn’t thought possible without magic.”

He fell silent, and she sensed his gaze on the side of her face.

“It’s just a Scouring Charm, Mione,” he said calmly. “Nothing remarkable at all, really.”

She nodded, because he was right. She was stuck, regardless.

What if there was a Trace on her wand? What if she was being tracked every time that she cast a spell? Tavaris would do this, surely, and then he would know where she was, and worse, with whom.

She was abruptly aghast with herself over the fact that she had never considered this possibility before. Her breath quickened, and she started to lower her wand, backing away from the sink.

Does he already know?

"Only I will know," Remus told her in a firm voice, as though he had somehow been listening to her thoughts, "and I won't tell anyone. You've cast spells before, and nothing bad has happened. Nothing bad will happen this time. Go ahead. *Scourgify*."

Hermione nodded again, because, again, he was right. If Tavaris were to put a Trace on her wand, he would have done it years ago. She took a slow, steadying breath and took aim once more, thinking hard, *Scourgify.*

Soap bubbles soon rose in lemony bunches and started popping against the edge of the cupboards above.

Remus brushed her hair out of her face, tucking it behind her ear. "See?" he said, in that simple way of his. "You've got it."

He stepped away and took out his wand to Summon a new rag. He set the cleaned dishes to begin drying themselves before flying back neatly into the cupboards.

"Anyway," she said breathlessly, desperately picking up where she had left off, "considering how many pairs of eyes and ears — and hands — and every other body part you can reasonably think of — that he had positioned in that government —"

"Interesting use of past tense."

"— even when help was offered, it was hardly ever received." She glanced sidelong at him. "You know very well I can't do anything about that — not at this point in time, anyway."

"That doesn't stop it from smarting," he muttered irritably, putting his wand down, "knowing people like him are still making decisions for us all."

"It bothers me, too, Remus," she promised him, as he plucked the latest edition of the *Prophet* off the kitchen table. "More than you will ever know."

He flashed her the headline: *CLAUSE FOR ANTI-CONTAMINATION APPROVED*.

"Dolores Umbridge is back on her usual tirade," he said, looking grim. "Have you had the pleasure of reading it yet?"

Hermione leaned back against the counter and crossed her arms over her chest, her wand still in hand.

"It took up the better part of our dinner conversation last night," she told him, in frustration. "I am still working to reverse the damage."

What she did not tell him was what Tavaris had said in his attempts to sway Theodore to his side of the argument.

"You wouldn't want a rabid dog slobbering all over your food, would you? So why would you want a werewolf cooking it?"

"At least the next generation has *you* shaping it," Remus said, as the last of the dishes were stacked away, the cupboard doors *banging* shut behind them. He crumpled up the *Prophet*, tossed it in the bin beneath the sink, and dropped onto a chair to flip through the *Daily Post* instead. "How is that going, by the way?"

Sighing heavily, Hermione joined him at the table. She rubbed her temples.

"We were looking at an animal book yesterday — non-magical ones but at least we have progressed past farm animals," she said wearily. "I don't believe I would have survived any more, 'What sound does a cow make?' Theodore was *mooing* every time we had beef for dinner. Anyway, when we got to the 'W' section of the book, specifically the weasel, Draco was … God, Remus, he was completely baffled! He claimed the picture in the book was incorrect. 'Weasels have red hair,' he insisted."

Remus winced.

"So Lucius Malfoy's already begun teaching his son about blood traitors, has he?"

"He inquired as to whether or not the wizard weasels lived in a hole in the ground, too," said Hermione crossly. "My tone of voice when I answered made him — well — not *cry*, exactly — Draco doesn't cry. He *screams*. Him and Pansy both. Honestly, they're like a pair of harpies."

Remus snorted. Summoning a pen for himself from a nearby drawer, he began scanning the job postings in the paper, circling the few he thought might be all right. Every month, he did this; every month, Hermione pretended not to watch.

She opened *A History of Magic* to where she had left off, midway through the chapter on medieval witch-burnings.

Non-magic people (more commonly known as Muggles) were particularly afraid of magic in medieval times, but not very good at recognising it.

With her pen, she underlined *afraid of magic* and wrote in the margin: *Largely due to religious influence.*

It had now been over two years since she had started this project of annotating Theodore's schoolbooks. Thus far, she had completed *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi* by Phyllida Spore, *A Beginner's Guide to Transfiguration* by Emeric Switch, plus *A Guide to Advanced Transfiguration*, and Miranda Goshawk's entire collection of *The Standard Book of*

Spells. Her days had gotten busier, however, ever since she had begun tutoring Theodore and Draco — and with time, coordinated by their shared aunt Bedelia, Pansy Parkinson and Daphne Greengrass as well.

Across the table, Remus' stomach rumbled loudly.

Hermione glanced up.

"Peckish?" she asked. "Have you had any lunch yet?"

"I could hardly move without waking you," he replied, putting the bent cap back on his pen. "But you should eat, too, now you're awake."

"Shall we pop downstairs?" she suggested, since the ice-box had been worryingly empty last she had checked, and she didn't want to make him admit this to her.

Remus appeared abnormally resistant to the idea.

"What is it?"

"Nothing," he said, with a shake of his head. He stood up. "Give me a moment to grab us jumpers and we can go."

Hermione frowned at his retreating back. She closed *A History of Magic*, left the kitchen, and was pulling on her brown leather boots — a recent gift from Tavaris, after she had made her disgust for his dragonhide journal known — when Remus emerged from the bedroom, yanking a striped jumper over his head.

"It's only … Well, I've been avoiding Skipper lately," he admitted as he came over to hand her another of his jumpers and put on his shoes, looking a little embarrassed. "He made a rather unflattering implication last time I saw him."

As soon as she got her head through the neck of his jumper, she raised her eyebrows at him.

"Oh?" she said, prompting him to go on.

But Remus didn't say anything as they exited the flat, not until he was turning the three locks on the door below. She ignored the way the noise pinched her nerves.

"He seems to be under the impression that I am an escort."

Hermione gave a small start.

"*An escort*?" she exclaimed, gobsmacked. "How on earth did he come to *that* conclusion?"

Remus pulled the door open and held it for her.

"In Skipper's defence, I spend quite a bit of time alone in my flat with a married woman," he said uncomfortably, as she stepped out, gaping still, "who, I might add, clearly comes from wealth, evades questions about her husband, and refuses to share her surname."

“But an *escort*?” she hissed, horrified. “That — that is not to say that I have anything against that — erm — line of work — I’ve met escorts before, you know, they were all perfectly lovely — I just — *oh*!” She covered her burning face with her hands. “This is *mortifying*!”

At the sound of Remus’ quiet laughter, she lowered her hands to glare at him.

“When did you have time to become acquainted with escorts?”

She ignored this. She could hardly explain that it had happened during her time in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

“You think this is funny, do you?” she snapped. She jabbed a finger at the entrance to the pub. “I thought it would be a lovely afternoon for a pint and a spot of lunch, Remus, and now I find out all the regulars at this establishment are under the impression that I pay for the pleasure of your company!”

“It’s only Skipper,” he said, but his grin was too broad.

Hermione turned away from him.

“Oh, what must Deidre think of me?” she moaned.

“Presumably that you are doomed to burn in hell for an eternity,” said Remus unhelpfully, “but that’s her opinion of Skipper as well.”

She shot him a mutinous look.

“I’m glad you seem to have recovered from your own embarrassment,” she said hotly.

“I am merely delighting in the fact that you won’t be putting up a fight anymore when I try to pay for lunch.”

“Oh, you —” She broke off with a huff, spun on her heel, and marched determinedly into the pub without waiting for him to follow.

Remus did, snickering under his breath as he went.

Thankfully, the pub was fuller today, providing distraction, and both Skipper and Scurvlock were too occupied to notice their entrance, for Jameson was behind the bar telling one of his stories again.

“At the time, though, I had hardly a hair on my chin — oh, sure, have yer laughs,” Jameson was practically shouting, grinning at the group of wizened men who perched along the bar, “I know yeh wouldn’t believe it lookin’ at me now but I had the face of a ween in those days!”

Hermione and Remus took their usual spot on a day like this, when the bar seats were all full, and sat down in the booth nearest the jukebox, which was, once again, playing Tom Jones.

“Anyway, so I knew I had to be findin’ myself another way,” Jameson carried on, his voice too loud to be ignored. “So I get creative. I go see my cousin Jimmy. He’s a few years older

than me, see, already of-age — a bit rough round the edges, Jimmy was, but I was well determined — and I ask him, I ask, 'Jimmy, you wouldn't happen to mind lendin' me your licence every now and then, would you?'"

"I fear we may have to wait this one out before we can order," said Remus, in mild amusement, watching the group from afar. "I'd hate to interrupt him."

"Just try to get his attention before Deirdre comes out and spots us," said Hermione moodily, and at the thought, she buried her face in her hands again. "Oh, Remus, she's *Catholic*! Not just any sort of Catholic, either — she's small-town-in-Northern-Ireland Catholic!"

"And Jimmy now, he's puzzled, tells me I already got me licence. I tell him, 'Jimmy, just 'cause I can drive don't mean I can drink!' And Jimmy — well, this was Jimmy, to be sure, so he finds this some sound logic. He says to me, he says, 'Bran, I have a grand idea if you've the bollocks for it.'"

There was a low whistle from one of the men, remarking upon the gravity of such a situation. Jameson nodded gravely.

"And I'm thinkin' to myself, 'Shit, he's brought my bollocks into this! Whatever he suggests now, I can't go backin' out!' Nothin' for it."

"How long do you suppose this will take?" Hermione asked.

"Haven't a clue," muttered Remus, leaning back in his seat. "I've never heard this one before. Bloody hell, there's Deirdre," he added, quickly sitting upright again.

At the sight of them, Deirdre threw a sidelong glance at her husband, rolled her eyes, and, lips pursed with disapproval, began pouring two pints. She left them on the bar top and disappeared into the kitchen, presumably to start on their usuals.

"Right. Wish me luck," said Remus, and he got up to fetch the two pints. Jameson didn't even notice him.

"So that's how I find myself goin' on up to the counter at the DVA bright and early the next day — I've just about an hour now before I'll have an earful about my chronic tardiness from Sister Matthew to look forward to, so even my knees are sweatin' — and I says to the lady working at the counter, I says, *real polite*, 'Good mornin' to you, ma'am. My name is Jimmy O'Donnell, and I am sorry to say I have misplaced my driver's licence.'"

Remus returned to the uproar of laughter.

"Ingenious!" one man was howling, slapping the bar.

"It is, isn't it?" said Skipper. "The first few dozen times he tells it, that is."

He ducked his head to avoid the rag Jameson hurled at him.

Hermione shook her head in exasperation. It mattered little how old anyone got, it seemed, for the child within them would never truly fade away.

“So,” she said conversationally, after taking a sip of her pint, “has your reread of *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* in nineteen-eighty-four been as enlightening as you had hoped?”

“Thus far, all it’s done is made me incredibly glad society hasn’t yet progressed technologically enough to launch itself into full-blown dystopia,” Remus replied lightly, drumming his fingers against the cool glass of his pint. “That, and I keep thinking Big Brother is spying on me through the telly. Half the time, I’ve got to do all the blinds before I can even read. I also suspect it’s worsened this particular habit of mine,” he added, lifting his pack of cigarettes from his pocket to show her.

She gave him an unimpressed look.

“Mione, the protagonist is constantly smoking,” he tried to defend himself — one of his weaker attempts. “How is anyone meant to read that without having a smoke themselves?”

“I don’t know — perseverance, perhaps?”

Now it was his turn to be unimpressed.

“Fine!” exclaimed Hermione, throwing her hands up in defeat. “Go on destroying your lungs, then! I don’t care anymore!”

Remus had the nerve to raise an eyebrow at her.

“You’re a ghastly liar, did you know that?”

Giving him an annoyed look, she seized his wrist to check the time on his watch. The sight only served to tire her, though; religiously, she watched it, but time was always running out.

“I have to be back by four o’clock,” she said. “The family is arriving this evening and I need to hit the shops first.”

“Our food will be out soon,” Remus reassured her, in a calm voice, turning his wrist over to grasp her hand. “Deirdre just has to spit in it first.”

Ten minutes later, Deirdre brought out a plate of fish and chips and another of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, sans saliva — hopefully. Remus went to fetch them, and this time, he was sighted; Skipper wheeled out from his table and followed him across the pub. And wherever Skipper went, Scurvlock soon followed; Remus shifted to make room for the latter on his side of the booth.

“Mione, dear, I’ve been wondering,” Skipper said, sounding chipper, “have you ever seen the film *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*?”

Remus choked on a potato. Scurvlock slapped him hard on the back, laughing brightly.

“For the love of God,” said Hermione shrilly, “Remus is *not* an escort!”

Skipper gave her a bemused frown.

“Who said anything about escorts?” he asked innocently, holding his cigarette aloft. “I was only talking about Audrey Hepburn. She is a very talented lady, you know.”

Hermione looked to Scurvlock for reason.

“Does Deirdre believe his nonsense?”

“Very little of it,” he said, with that twinkle of humour in his crinkled eyes. “But you ought not bother yourself with what Deirdre does or does not believe. I certainly do not.”

“Now I know the licence sayin’ I’m Bran McCabe has got to stay in my pocket,” Jameson was going on still, as he wiped the bar top down with a new, yet-to-be-thrown rag. “Cannot show the Garda that, can I? He’ll soon discover I am as fluthered as a young lass huntin’ a toilet in a Spoons. Yeh ever hear o’ those, the Spoons? Fairly new pubs, weans go mad for ‘em — stairs for days. My granddaughter Mari’s gone twistin’ both ankles on the hike, holds on for dear life now, she says.”

“It looks spit-free to me,” Remus said, with a glance at Hermione’s plate.

“Oh, you can’t ever really tell,” said Skipper.

Hermione tried to ignore this as she picked suspiciously at her chips, struggling to decide whether they were soggier than usual or not.

“Trouble is, I cannot go showin’ him the one what says Jimmy O’Donnell, either! Time is a tickin’, though. Garda starts tappin’ his foot, an’ me, well, I am about ten seconds from soilin’ my trousers and my da’s car both! Got to show somethin’.”

Jameson planted his hands on the bar and leaned forward, scrutinising his audience.

“What d’yeh reckon is worse — drivin’ under the influence or drivin’ under the influence bein’ underage?”

“How long is the family staying this time?” Remus asked Hermione, tearing off a chunk of his Yorkshire pudding. He used it to mop up some gravy.

“The rest of the month, possibly longer,” she sighed, as she cut up her fish. “Their visits tend to drag on — and that is when there are *not* any questions of inheritance involved. I am not particularly looking forward to it.”

“And that,” Jameson finished finally, “is the story of how my cousin Jimmy got his first charge.”

She looked up miserably.

“Remus … I have got to wear a *shroud*.”

It turned out to be just as uncomfortable as she had imagined. At least she was not alone in wearing one; the other Nott women also had black lace draped over their heads and shoulders. In fact, the room at Nottingham Hall in which they were currently receiving guests

had been by and large draped in sheer black cloth itself. The fabric hung from the bannister above the Great Hall, flowed down the length of the tall windows, and even cloaked some of the furniture by which the Nott family was gathered.

It reminded Hermione of the black powdery fog that had enveloped the place the day Harry had been born.

But it was not that day now, she reassured herself, swallowing her guilt as Martin and Kathryn Bones wandered back into the throng of people after paying their respects, because the rug on which her feet currently rested was not occupied by Tillie Bones' corpse; rather, it was where four-year-old Theodore was dangling a tiny stuffed mouse enticingly at Crookshanks whilst his seven-year-old cousin Delany whispered to him in French.

Hermione frowned. She had confiscated that toy mouse over an hour ago, before any of the guests had arrived, when Theodore had announced his plans to bring it to the burial later to use as a diversion to prevent Crookshanks from pouncing in the grave and "getting *buried alive*, Ma."

He had nicked it right from her pocket, the little thief.

At that moment, however, a couple of people from the Potions Association's Board of Governors approached to offer their condolences, so she had to hold off on the existential crisis that was the idea of her son potentially becoming a pickpocket. She hoped she succeeded in wiping the stupefied look off her face when she rose to clasp Tiberius Ogden's hand.

"You have my deepest sympathies, Lady Nott," he said, smiling grimly. "He was without a doubt one of the more entertaining fellows I have had the pleasure of knowing."

"Entertaining," repeated Griselda Marchbanks beside him, with an arch look on her wizened face. "Ah, yes, that's the word for it." She took Hermione's hand next, as Ogden moved on to Aunt Adalaide. "My apologies for your loss, dear."

"Thank you, Madam Marchbanks."

"I must say, I was quite shocked myself to hear of the *reason* for his dismissal," Professor Slughorn waffled on nearby, with a reproving expression. He was gesturing emphatically with his glass of Dragon Barrell Brandy. "Certainly, I was surprised that a Defence Against the Dark Arts professor had not even lasted past March, but I would *never* have expected such — oh, *deviance*, shall I say — from *him* of all people! But no, no, I insist I must tell you no more — this is no occasion for gossip, after all!"

It was also no occasion to be dressed entirely in crushed velvet, but alas, here he was. At least his robes were black, rather than his favourite fuchsia or some other eye-watering colour to which he was inexplicably attracted.

"Do not trouble yourself, sir," said Tavaris tersely, tightening his grasp on his tumbler. "There is certainly plenty of other gossip circulating here at the moment."

Indeed, many of the people who presently milled about the Great Hall had their heads bent together as they exchanged whispers, and those careful undertones were not likely to be out of respect for the dead. By the bar, Wymond Selwyn and Gerlach Rowle could be spotted snickering subtly into their goblets.

"Yes … that is unfortunate, m'boy, very unfortunate. Nevertheless," Professor Slughorn said, with renewed confidence, "we must endeavour to remember him ourselves not for his death but for all the good he did whilst he was alive."

Hermione scoffed under her breath. Luckily, only Aunt Adalaide caught it, so she received just the one scolding look.

Professor Slughorn puffed out his chest, lifted his great chin, and raised his glass high in the air.

"To Theomund Nott the Eighth!"

No one joined the toast. Barnett cleared his throat.

"Er — seventh?" said Professor Slughorn uncertainly.

"Ninth."

"Oh, was it?" He chuckled uncomfortably. "My dearest apologies. To Theomund Nott the Ninth!"

"It would please him, I think," Rawdon said, nodding assuredly, after everyone's drinks had been lowered once more, "to be inspiring all this excitement."

Tate let out a mirthless guffaw that startled the four Macmillans who had come to pay their respects.

"*Ach, please him*!" she exclaimed in outrage. "Das ist alles deine Schuld!"

"Ich habe nichts getan!" said Rawdon at once, indignant.

His sister jabbed a finger at his chest.

"*Your creature reserve — your fault*."

"But, Mama," Terric interjected, in defence of his uncle-cousin, "look at brightside — 'e could 'ave died so boring!"

"Ach, Terric, be serious," Aunt Adalaide sneered. "This is not *funny story*."

She pointed accusingly at Rawdon.

"His chimaera ate your papa!"

Everyone looked at Rawdon, who made a helpless gesture.

“I tell him toilet is right — he goes left! Not my fault he enters enclosure.”

Aunt Adalaide held her hand up and turned her head away as if to say, “I don’t want to hear it.”

“They are certainly — er — accurately classified, Chimaeras,” said Professor Slughorn awkwardly. “In fact — and this was quite a while ago so you may have already heard — but it was a *chimaera* that most recently took a chunk out of Silvanus Kettleburn!”

Oswald Macmillan appeared momentarily too flummoxed by all this to recall what he had come over to do. His wife, Honoria, came forward with their daughter Pippa.

“We are terribly sorry for your loss, Lady Nott,” she said kindly, and her words were repeated by Pippa, who then poked her brother and gave him a pointed look.

Ernie shuffled closer and peered up at Hermione shyly.

“My con-doe-senses,” he mumbled. At another poke, he added hastily, “Lady Nott.”

Hermione bent slightly to give his hand a small squeeze.

“Thank you, Ernie,” she whispered.

Looking relieved that bit was over, Ernie promptly turned to insert himself in Theodore and Delany’s conversation, which subsequently returned to English. Pippa followed.

“May I ask, Mr Nott, what has become of your chimaera now?”

“Macnair,” was Rawdon’s curt reply.

“An executioner from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures,” Tavaris explained, in a voice dulled, presumably, by his disinterest in the continuation of this conversation.

“But he did not succeed!” Rawdon interjected forcefully. “Only *one time* —” he held up a finger, “— wizard succeeded in slaying Chimaera, and only witnesses lived to tell the tale!”

“Zis Macnair tried so ‘ard, caused great injury to beast,” Terric put in, and he promptly screwed up his face and began swinging an imaginary axe.

“We petitioned for the jurisdiction to have the matter seen to ourselves,” Tavaris had to explain further, as Terric continued his gruesome imitation of Walden Macnair’s failure to chop the chimaera’s head off, “and having worked so closely with Theomund in the past, Minister Schulz was sympathetic to our situation and spoke to the Greek League of Magic on our behalf. He’s here now, in fact — you’ve not been acquainted, have you, sir?”

Although Professor Slughorn’s head did turn, his greedy eyes dancing over the heads of the many guests clad in black who were using this opportunity not to grieve but to covertly forge connections, this attempt to get rid of him was ultimately unsuccessful. As he made

abundantly clear a few minutes later, the connection he most desired was standing right in front of him.

“Perhaps this is not the most appropriate time to pose this question,” he ventured carefully, “but I shall admit I *have* wondered, with poor Theomund gone — rest his soul — who is to be taking over as Director of the European Potions Trade and Distribution Company?”

This time, it was Aunt Adalaide who scoffed under her breath.

“That would be me, sir,” said Tavaris unenthusiastically.

“Oh, of course, it would be, m’boy, that’s —” Professor Slughorn changed tactics and patted him on the arm, smiling awkwardly, “— that’s very bittersweet, I imagine.”

Ivette rolled her eyes behind his back.

Just then, Minister Bagnold approached with her husband in tow — unfortunately at the exact same moment that Crookshanks darted across the rug, leapt onto the sofa, and went soaring over the side table behind it to catch the flying toy mouse in his mouth and consequently give the Head of the Hungarian Office of International Magical Affairs the fright of his life.

The large granite urn on the side table wobbled in warning; the next second, it toppled off the edge and plummeted to the ground, where it shattered with a great, shocking *SMASH*, the ashes from within spilling out across the shining hardwood floor.

Not a moment later, the massive, gilded portrait of Theomund fell forward off its display easel to land with a resounding *THUD*.

There was a profound silence.

And then the portrait began muttering mutinously in German.

“See, Theodore,” said Hermione, with strained patience, “this is why we do not bring cat toys to a celebration of life.”

And how suited to Slytherin House he sorely was, because as everyone stared, Theodore pointed at Delany and said loudly, “That one was a *real* mouse and he was saving us!”

Delany nodded rapidly in agreement. Probably due to peer-pressure, Pippa, too, began nodding her head. Ernie, on the other hand, clutched his cheeks and cried out in horror, “*That was real*?”

“It was *wriggling*,” Theodore told him gravely.

Delany wriggled his fingers in Ernie’s face for effect.

Somewhere in the Hall, Pansy began shrieking.

Thankfully (depending on one’s opinion), Rawdon then spotted Walden Macnair across the room and diverted everyone’s attention with a brand-new diversion which involved drawing

his wand and charging directly at him.

“Oma, look,” Terric said to Aunt Adalaide, pointing to the impromptu re-enactment of guerrilla warfare techniques, “not boring death at all.”

“I suppose it is lucky ‘e ‘ad to be cremated,” said Ivette, as Tavaris, Tate, and Barnett all stared blankly at the pile of ash. “If zat ‘ad been a casket …” She trailed off, shuddering.

Unsurprisingly, all the children wished to learn — or talk — about that week was Chimaeras.

“Has it lots of sharp teef?” Draco asked, interrupting some educational marble-counting. “I bet it does.”

“*So* sharp,” said Pansy, giving him a significant look. “So it can go like this —” She bared her teeth at him and hissed.

He jerked away from her with a yelp, inadvertently sending his collection of green marbles flying across the floor in every direction.

“And then it eats you alive!” Theodore chimed in, as Pansy pretended to snap her jaws at Draco. “We must learn our lefts and rights or we’ll *die*!”

Usually, counting an item that they could each collect worked in holding their attention, thanks to all their competitiveness; they had to learn to count all their marbles, otherwise they wouldn’t know who was winning or who to stick their tongue out at. Hermione had slowly been adding more marbles to the mix so that they had higher to count.

That afternoon, however, only Daphne was doing any counting, gently poking her pink marbles one-by-one as she sat cross-legged on the indigo rug of the schoolroom at Nottingham Hall.

Hermione stroked her hair for encouragement, then said strictly, “Pansy and Theodore, that is quite enough. Stop frightening Draco on purpose.”

“It wasn’t on purpose!” Pansy lied, loudly and poorly. “It was an accident, Lady Mione — an invisible wizard Transfigured me into a chimaera and now I have to eat him!”

Draco, white-faced with terror, crawled hurriedly into Hermione’s lap to hide from her.

“But not if he knows left and right,” said Theodore sensibly. “Theomund died ‘cause he had to pee so badly ‘cause he drank so much water that he didn’t remember left *or* right.”

With a keen sense of defeat, Hermione put the marble game on pause to teach them left from right.

A half hour later, whilst Draco (somewhat), Pansy (begrudgingly), and Daphne (dutifully) all worked to copy down a few simple words in English, French, and Latin, Theodore came up to Hermione to request on all their behalf that she make a lesson plan for learning Chimaeras and — as if he thought it might help — he offered a page that she knew immediately had

been torn straight from the "C" section of Newt Scamander's *Fantastic Beast and Where to Find Them*. He claimed, in an undertone, that Daphne had torn it out of her father's old copy.

Hermione thought he was full of it and checked every copy in both Nottingham Hall and the Nott Estate. In the end, though, not even the copy she had purchased to annotate for him turned out to be missing a page, and she was forced to concede that Daphne — who communicated mostly by some combination of nodding, smiling, and batting her eyelashes — was indeed the vandaliser-in-training.

That night, Hermione started on annotating the book. Specifically, the passage on Chimaeras. She underlined the *XXXXX* M.O.M. Classification a total of five highly impassioned times, then repeated, in case her meaning was not clear enough: *Known wizard killer / impossible to train or domesticate.*

Truth be told, she did feel slightly bad about Theomund's death, and she suspected it was only partially to do with the affects it was having on Tavaris, who was not coping well with his cousin's death, nor the added responsibility he had inherited because of it. The night of the burial, he had drunk himself into a stupor and nodded off on her bed in the robin room, with his head on her lap, and at that moment, she had mostly just been thinking that she should have caved to sleeping in the master bedroom, anyway, for all the good choosing her own room had done her.

But when it kept happening, just as it had after Edmund had died, then she felt bad. It was a strangely abstract sort of sorrow; she could sense the sadness inside herself, but she could not pinpoint what reason it had for being there. Theomund had been — as Ogden had put it — rather an entertaining fellow, but he had, at the end of the day, been a terrible person. So had Edmund.

And yet, her eyes were stinging, like she might start crying over their deaths herself.

"I never wanted this," Tavaris mumbled, his voice slightly slurred and muffled against the blankets, as his head laid once more in her lap. "I had my father sign the company over to him for a reason."

"I know," she said quietly.

"All I wanted growing up … before any of the rest of it became even an option … was to laze about like some drunken wastrel, entirely derelict in my duties, and to die having discovered some great secret to magic without ever sharing it with anyone."

"You don't do well with lazing about, Tavaris," she pointed out gently.

"I *know*," he said, his voice cracking. "It's very inconvenient."

Hermione sighed, rubbing one of her wet, sleep-ridden eyes, and kept running her fingers through his hair, hoping he would fall asleep sooner rather than later.

There were, alas, several spectacular upsides to Theomund's drunkenly walking into the Chimaera enclosure at Rawdon's magical creature reserve.

To begin with, half the time she was in Diagon Alley, she could confirm this fact by meeting Tavaris at the E.P.T.D.'s British Office to join him on the journey home, further solidifying her story. Even better, every potion or ingredient she purchased from Mr Mulpepper's Apothecary was suddenly free of charge, and — since it was not Tavaris' money she was spending — Remus was at last willing to accept her regular replenishment of his subpar stores of healing salves and elixirs. Plus, as Tavaris was now in control of all potions trade in Europe, the Potions Association's Board of Governors and their respective spouses became semi-regular dinner guests, and thus the providers of fascinating (and legal-pertaining) dinner conversation upon which Hermione did not have to intrude to be involved.

Edolie Parkinson — Pansy's grandmother — unfortunately brought Paulus Parkinson, whom Hermione would rather do without, and Brunhilde Stokke had too-purple hair, too many pearls, and too much personality, but Griselda Marchbanks had a bounty of wit, Pius Thicknesse consistently proved himself a riveting conversationalist (except for during those later years of the second wizarding war when he had been under the Imperius Curse), and apart from his boasting about his hunting habits, Tiberius Ogden was more than acceptable company.

Plus, inciting sheer giddiness, she got to speak with Arsenius Jigger, the author of *Magical Drafts and Potions*, *Potion Opuscule*, and *The Essential Defence Against the Dark Arts*. She spent most of pre-dinner drinks — and dinner itself, and the other drinks that followed it — picking his brain, much to his apparent amusement.

But best of all, Tavaris had to travel a lot.

Whole weekends spent out of country, with Hermione and Theodore left peacefully to themselves. She took to having their meals served right in the warmly-lit basement kitchen, so he could not only experience eating on something other than an embroidered placemat and well-cushioned upholstery but also gain an appreciation for the fact that someone was slaving away (literally) to prepare his food.

He needed to know how hard Dinky and Goppy worked to maintain the pleasures of his daily life. After all, she had never met either one of them in the future; this meant either that Dinky and Goppy were no longer alive, or that Theodore had no difficulty meeting the demands of the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare, thus preventing Dinky and Goppy from ever residing at S.P.E.W.'s headquarters whilst on strike.

Hermione was determined for it to be the latter.

As an extra precaution, she made Pansy eat in the kitchen, too.

"It takes a lot of work to prepare our food, doesn't it?" Hermione said tacitly.

Theodore and Pansy both nodded fervently, watching Dinky stand on a stool to stir the mashed potatoes on the stovetop. Every few seconds, their eyes darted to the pot of stew sizzling beside it, then to the knives they had chopping vegetables to check that this chopping had not progressed to mincing.

"I'm so happy elves do it," said Pansy, wide-eyed.

“Me, too,” said Theodore, nodding again.

“So we must always remember to thank them, mustn’t we?” said Hermione, looking at them both pointedly. “For everything they do to make our lives easier.”

“But, Lady Mione, you don’t thank elves,” said Pansy, looking back at her in befuddlement. “They’re elves. And sometimes they forget or mess up, and then they need to be punished, not thanked.”

“Really?” said Theodore, taken aback.

“Yeah —”

“Yes,” interjected Hermione firmly.

Pansy rolled her eyes in exasperation.

“*Yes*, *yes*, *yes*, *yeah* — I mean, *yes*. Daddy says so.”

“Not everything your father says is true,” Hermione told her.

“Erm … *yeah*, it is.”

It was a work in progress.

Of course, it must also be mentioned that whenever word got out that Tavaris was out of the house for the weekend, people felt the inexplicable need to visit. This was fine by Hermione when it was Bedelia or Narcissa — or even Aurelia Parkinson — but sometimes, it meant slamming the door in Lachlan Travers’ face. What his reason was for calling on her that day, she was entirely uninterested in discovering.

It was on another day toward the end of May, whilst Tavaris was in Guyana to see about ordering a shipment of Fwooper feathers, that she opened the door to find, to her horror, Walburga Black standing on the front steps.

“Lady Nott,” Walburga greeted rigidly. “You are a notoriously difficult witch to get a hold of, you know.”

Shit.

Against the colourful, sunflower-laden backdrop of the lady’s parlour, Walburga looked severely out of place. If she felt so, she did not show it, though it was just as likely that she considered her presence such a privilege that being out of place was an impossibility. Far more surreal than this sight, however, was her current agreeability.

“That is a lovely piano you have, Lady Nott,” she remarked with a glance behind herself. She lifted her teacup from the saucer held delicately in her hand. “Do you play?”

Hermione, too, glanced at the blue grand piano; its fallboard was shut, and had been for almost four years.

“I did,” she said.

Walburga nodded as though she had expected this.

“It is a valuable skill for a young lady to have,” she told Hermione pompously. “I ensured that both my nieces were taught as girls.”

“Both?” said Hermione, in feigned confusion. “I hadn’t realised you only had the two.”

Walburga ignored this.

“Their mother wished to set *string* instruments upon them; it was only the fear of crooked necks and rounded shoulders that prevented Druella from going through with it. If you have not realised yourself, you will find you agree when I tell you this: the music from a violin sounds far better when one need not be bothered by the sight of whatever is presently producing it.”

She took a sip of her tea while she waited, presumably, for Hermione’s impending agreement.

“Is this truly the matter you so desperately wished to discuss with me?” Hermione asked instead. Her own teacup returned loudly, and intentionally so, to its saucer. “The *value* in teaching young girls how to entertain?”

Remarkably, Walburga looked away.

“I taught Regulus to play,” she shared, after a moment, her eyes once more on the piano. “He showed a great aptitude for it, of course, as he did in the case of most everything. You cannot imagine how pleased I was that it came to him so naturally. That had not been the case when I had sought to teach his brother to play. Sirius lacked the patience necessary to absorb my lessons.”

She was no longer referring to the piano.

“I don’t believe patience had anything to do with it,” said Hermione coldly.

“You have a son yourself, Lady Nott,” said Walburga, facing her properly again. “There is no question that you have your own lessons you must be seeking to teach him even now, small as he remains. Matters of magnificent importance to you which you could not bear for him to go without knowing, without understanding, and without bothering to concern himself with once you are not there to be concerned in his stead. Imagine now that you had spent years upon years instilling these lessons in him, and in all that time, he had thought so little of your words that he had not spared them even half an ear.”

Hermione thought of those meals in the kitchen and shifted in discomfort, biting down on her cheek.

“Neither of my sons will be coming home,” Walburga went on, in a stiff manner and with stiffer posture, as though each sentence she spoke had been painstakingly prepared yet, nevertheless, had to be torn from her tongue. “However, in spite of all that separates us, it has become clear that I have not lost them both as I once thought I had. It has become clear that

when I sought to teach them all that matters most in this world, Regulus was not the only one listening. Indeed, neither son will ever come home to Grimmauld Place, but against all odds, they have both come home to me. In this, I may take comfort.

"So, Lady Nott, the matter I wished to discuss with you is truthfully a few words that I have felt — *ahem* — for *many* years now — that I must say, and to your face. For whatever role you might have played, whether that should have been reminding Sirius of my words and what they sought to teach him or extending your hand when he could see no others from that hole into which he insisted upon digging himself, my gratitude will never cease. Thank you, deeply, for helping to bring my son home to me."

The silence that followed was long, for Hermione did not know what to say, or even if she should say anything at all. Walburga could not have been more wrong about Sirius, but Hermione could not tell her this, of course, and she was oddly hesitant to even imply it.

Ultimately, she said nothing.

And apparently, Walburga did not need her to say anything. Without another word, she stood, set down her unfinished tea, and exited the parlour.

Her legs, though covered by her draping black robes, must not have been too sturdy, because she kept one hand on the bannister as she rounded the stairwell. Hermione followed, eyeing her stride unsurely. Had a "Thank you" truly taken so much of her strength?

Kreacher was waiting at the foot of the stairs, where he and Goppy had been chatting, appearing for all the world as though they were a pair of blue-collar workers on a smoke break.

At the sight of Walburga, Kreacher stopped talking immediately and hastened to her side to grasp her elbow, as if to steady her. A slight sheen had formed on her forehead, now sheet-white, giving her an abruptly feverish appearance.

She had only a year left to live, Hermione was reminded. She had never imagined Walburga to be genuinely sick, merely mad; a shut-in who had eventually succumbed to it. Kreacher had always said that she had died of a broken heart, but now Hermione wondered what he had truly meant by that.

"Take me home now, Kreacher," Walburga said imperiously.

"Yes, Mistress Black," said Kreacher, bowing his head. He began to lead her toward the front doors, murmuring to her all the while. "Kreacher is here, Mistress … Kreacher has you … Kreacher will take you home …"

Once they had left, Hermione went to fetch a shawl from her bedroom; she felt as though she had caught a sudden chill.

The following day, when she saw Remus, she wondered for a while if she ought to tell him about her visit from Walburga Black. She felt an inexplicable urge to vent about it, and to someone who would, at least in part, understand the gravity of what Walburga had said.

Alas, although it had been almost three years now since that night in Godric's Hollow, Remus had yet to utter Sirius' name. Hermione would not be the one to force him to.

She kept the visit to herself. Instead, as she sat on the oriental rug that she had forced upon him last Christmas with *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* open on the coffee table and struggled to come up with something non-revealing to say about Basilisks, she told him about other things he ought to know — namely, things about his future students.

"She may not seem it, but trust me, Remus, she's stealthy. For months I have thought she was excelling in her spelling — her mother was so pleased when I told her and her father even got her a pink Fwooper-feather quill as a reward — only, as it turns out, she has been copying off Theodore the entire time."

Remus snorted a laugh, glancing up from the *Prophet*, whose crossword he was currently working on.

"This is Daphne, you said? The one who scarcely speaks?"

"Oh, she speaks *plenty*, apparently," said Hermione significantly. "All I ever get from her is 'Yes, Lady Mione,' and 'No, Lady Mione,' or 'You look pretty today, Lady Mione' — and then Theodore goes and calls Tiberius Ogden a wanker and — wouldn't you believe — he learnt the word from Daphne."

"Did he say that to Ogden's face?" asked Remus, grinning.

"It's Theodore," she replied irritably. "Of course, he did." She pursed her lips in displeasure, then added begrudgingly, "However, Ogden *was* talking about the Bicorn he's recently slaughtered and had mounted above his mantle so … I must be selective in regard to my discipline."

Grinning still, Remus returned to the crossword.

"Never a dull moment at Lady Mione's Academy for Over-Privileged Children," he said, in amusement.

"No, sadly not."

She looked back at the passage on Basilisks, biting down absently on the end of her pen. She had moved past the "B" section weeks ago, leaving this part blank, but she wanted it done before she moved on to "T," otherwise she feared she would never write anything there at all.

Ironically, she had marked up this passage once before, in another copy; *Pipes*, she had written, for Ron and Harry to later find. She wanted to write something similar now, to provide a proper warning even though, when the Chamber of Secrets would be opened once more in his second year at Hogwarts, Theodore would not be at risk of Petrification or death by monstrous snake, unlike herself.

Did Tavaris know what lurked in the Chamber of Secrets? He must have. Perhaps she could ask him what to write when he returned that night, so that whatever she wrote would not be

too suspicious.

No, she thought glumly, shaking her head to herself. *Tavaris would just cross out the bit about no sightings in Britain and let Theodore wonder for the hell of it.*

Sighing, she just wrote, *Keep still and avoid eye-contact*, and flipped forward to the "T"s where she had left off.

"Tebos …" she murmured, contemplating, "'… *power of invisibility … very dangerous … hide is highly prized by wizards for protective shields and clothing —*' oh, absolutely not." And she circled that last sentence and wrote shortly, *Don't you dare.*

Remus started chuckling softly.

She raised her head, immediately defensive.

"It's *inhumane*."

"I'm not disagreeing with you," he smiled, with a small shake of his head. "You're just … amusing to watch."

She rolled her eyes and pursed her lips, attempting to smother a smile of her own. She did trolls next, because that one was easy: *Pea-brained or not, please avoid the mountain troll at all costs.*

Then only one creature remained under "T."

Hermione blew out a slow breath, sitting back on her heels. What she wrote here mattered, perhaps more than what she would write for any other creature in this book.

What did she want Theodore to know about Thestrals that he would not learn elsewhere?

Thestrals could only be seen by those who had seen death. She had been envious, at first, of Harry, for his ability to see them. He had very swiftly set her straight; he had known death at fifteen in a way she never could have, and as he had pointed out to her, there was nothing to be envious of about that. In time, she had seen them herself; within a couple of years, nearly their entire graduating class had known that the school carriages did not, in fact, pull themselves.

It had been a haunting sight.

What she had wondered even then, however, was why Harry had not seen them from the very beginning; his mother had died in front of him, after all. Then again, Harry had been too young to understand what was happening. When Cedric Diggory had died, he had been old enough to know.

She thought back to the lesson Hagrid had given them all back in their fifth year, when Dolores Umbridge and her clipboard had invaded their afternoon Care of Magical Creatures class to interrogate them all on his teaching methods. The flesh of a dead cow being torn off

by some invisible entity in front of a group of impressionable students had not exactly helped Hagrid's case.

At the time, only three people had been able to see the thestral: Harry, Neville, and that stringy Slytherin boy who, rather than been jarred by the sight, had wrinkled his nose in disgust.

Hermione paused.

Her vision tunnelled until, suddenly, all she could see was that boy, seeing that thestral, with his nose scrunched up and his expression full of distaste, so undaunted by what he was seeing, as though it were nothing new to him.

And in the end, it all came down to simple maths.

The number one was no more or less than the number one, but add another one, and together they formed a question with a clear, fixed answer: one, Mione Nott died while her son was a child, plus one, Mione Nott's son witnessed someone die as a child, equalled two.

Her grip slackened, and the pen fell from her hand.

*

The whole of Nottingham Hall itself appeared to be dressed in a shroud of sheer black cloth. From the people with whom the Great Hall was filled, scarcely more than a sullen stir of speech arose. Only a single sentence repeated itself softly, on a lacklustre loop. One by one they approached, a procession of families, to deliver this sentence in such a way to make it seem more profound to them in its meaning than it had been to the last person who had delivered it.

Theo did not say a word to any single one of them. He sat at the foot of the stairs in the entry hall now, hiding from them all and all their sordid sorriness, and stared out the frosted window on his right, through which a draft sifted indoor.

The day was cold and dull, as far as the weather was concerned. Clumpy mounds of snow lingered on the deadened earth outside, their window in which to melt cut short by the late-afternoon's drop in temperature, and so grey was the sky that whether it had been overtaken by clouds or not was a mystery, for all that was above remained to the eye an inscrutable iron tundra.

Theo was not cold, though. And dull was the farthest possible thing from what he felt.

His chest was hot and tight, and his hands, somehow, were sweating. He squeezed the silver ring in his fist, the edge of its large emerald biting into his palm.

From nearby, he heard an even *clunking* noise, growing louder the closer it got. It stopped just in front of him, and a gruff voice said, "You picked a nice dress."

Theo tore his gaze from the window and looked up.

“You could see it?” he asked curiously.

Auror Moody nodded his great, grizzly head. For once, he was not wearing his uniform, but a set of plain, black dress robes. His magical eye rolled in its socket, its blue iris disappearing to peer back into the Great Hall.

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “White dress, blue sash.”

“Blue *satin* sash,” Theo corrected sharply. “It’s from her favourite song.”

He turned back to the window, trying not to breath so harshly; to his ears, he sounded fuming. He supposed that he was.

“I heard you can see through anything with that eye,” he muttered waspishly, after a long moment. “But that’s not true, is it?”

“Isn’t it?”

He looked up again. Moody was gazing down at him with raised eyebrows, his scarred hands clasped over the gnarled top of his wooden walking-stick.

“You can’t see through people,” said Theo.

“What makes you so sure about that?”

“Well, maybe some people — but not all of them,” he said quickly. “A lot of people were still able to be here today.”

Moody snorted.

“You make a good point,” he said wryly, and he lowered himself with a grunt to sit beside Theo on the steps. “Perhaps that’d be why I announced my retirement this morning. People grow old, and then they can’t see as well as they used to.”

Frowning, Theo twisted to face him.

“So you used to see through everyone, just not anymore?”

“Oh, I’d wager I still can,” said Moody assuredly, his expression turning grim. “Trouble is, boy, everyone else’s eyes have gotten tired of seeing the same thing time and time again. They decided blind was better — easier for them to sleep at night.”

“How did they do it?” demanded Theo hotly. “How did they just *stop seeing* what’s right in front of them?”

Moody gave a humourless chuckle.

“If you ever find out the answer to that question,” he told Theo, “do me a favour and let me know.”

Theo clenched his jaw, teeth grinding. He returned his gaze to the window once more.

“She should have died outside,” he said angrily. “That way she’d have had snowflakes on her nose and eyelashes when she got to the Beyond.”

Chapter End Notes

With my deepest condolences, here is the FULL verse from the song lyric summary:
Finally something
Finally news
About how the story ends
She doesn’t exist now
Survived by her son
And all of her brand-new friends

The next chapter will be posted later this week, because I'm not cruel enough to make you wait on THIS miserable ending for months.

Foretold Yet Unforeseen

Chapter Summary

> Well, I met an old man dying on a train
> No more destination, no more pain
> Well, he said one thing, before I graduate
> “Never let your fear decide your fate”
> — Kill Your Heroes, AWOLNATION

Chapter Notes

> CW: extreme emotional turmoil, but, like, you knew this already.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dazedly, Hermione looked up from the page. She could feel her heart beating in her chest, not racing nor pounding, merely an even rhythm of which she had never been more aware.

Remus was regarding her with what appeared to be some small amount of apprehension, now sat upright on the sofa. The crossword laid abandoned on the cushion beside him.

“Mione?” he said, and by the patient way in which he did, she wondered if he even expected her to hear him.

It took her a moment to find her voice.

“E—excuse me a minute,” she stammered, and she shut *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* and struggled up from her spot on the rug, one hand on the coffee table for leverage.

Ignoring his gaze, she walked on stiff legs into the kitchen and straight through to the small bathroom at the other end, closing the door gently behind her.

She faced the sink, gripping the basin with both hands, and attempted to keep breathing evenly. One glimpse of her own stark-white face in the mirror had her dropping her head to stare at the drain instead.

Her mind was reeling.

“No,” she breathed, but this time, she was aware that she was lying to herself.

She tried to think rationally.

To tell herself that it had been someone else whom Theodore had seen die would be grasping at straws — a blatantly senseless, idiotic denial to which even she could not allow herself to cave. For as long as she could recall, she had struggled to believe in that which she could not see, and on this trait, denial would always thrive. But now she knew the facts, and the facts could not be ignored.

There were other people close to Theodore who would die over the course of his childhood — this was a fact.

Abraxas would die, but of Dragon Pox, so whenever he went, Theodore would not be permitted anywhere near him. Geoffrey would die, somehow, but Theodore was hardly ever near him as it was; as if he considered children an infectious disease of their own, Geoffrey steered well clear of him. Perhaps another of the Notts would die, but as had been exemplified by Theomund, it was only after the death had occurred that the family reunited; therefore, it could only be one of them if someone happened to die whilst they were already visiting, and the odds of this happening were slim.

Of course, she had to consider the bone-chilling possibility that Theodore would see someone die before his fifth year at Hogwarts for much the same reason Harry had, as a result of the recent stirrings of war. It had been in his own home, after all, that seventeen-year-old Draco had witnessed the murder of the Hogwarts Muggle Studies professor, Charity Burbage. But this was another fact; unless travelling, the Dark Lord had stayed at Malfoy Manor during the second war. That time around, it had been Malfoy Manor at which all manner of malevolent business had been conducted, not Nottingham Hall. Tavaris had, presumably, fallen out of the Dark Lord's good graces, and Lucius had taken his place.

So, if it would not be one of his father's friends, and it would not be one of his cousins, and it would not be an act of murder at a time of war, that left just one other possibility.

And this possibility was itself a fact.

There could be no guesswork about Hermione's death if someone were to bear witness to it. No *missing*. No *presumed*.

Just dead.

She felt as though she might faint. She gripped the basin tighter, willing herself to stay upright.

There was a small rapping at the door. Remus' voice reached her ears, hushed and hesitant.

"Mione? Are you alright in there?"

As softly as Hermione swore, she suspected that he could still make it out. Even separated by a door, there were just inches between them — and at this moment, there needed to be more. She could not be near him, not like this.

An excuse, she thought madly. *What's my excuse?*

Once she had one in mind, she took a slow, steadying breath, straightened up, and opened the door to meet his concerned gaze.

“Sorry — everything’s fine,” she lied, wincing purposefully. “My period has just arrived earlier than expected.”

“Ah,” said Remus, a touch uncomfortably.

“I need to head back now. I didn’t bring anything with me.”

“Right, of course.”

He shifted his weight, then stepped aside to let her pass, avoiding her gaze.

“Sorry,” she repeated.

“No, I understand,” he hastened to assure her. “It’s — er — natural,” he added, and he promptly appeared to cringe at himself.

He followed her out to collect her wand from the coffee table and continue into the narrow hallway, where she retrieved her coat and boots and began pulling them on.

“I’ll see you next weekend, then?” she said, glancing at him.

He gave her a nod.

“Saturday, if you can manage it. Sunday,” he said, shoving his hands into his trouser pockets, “I’ll be doing inventory for Jameson and Deirdre.”

“All right. Saturday, then.” Hermione pecked him hastily on the cheek before stepping out onto the landing, adding breathlessly over her shoulder, “Bye.”

“Feel better!” he called after her, as she started down the stairs, and she waved a hand distractedly to show that she had heard.

It was only when she was unlocking the door that Remus seemed to remember that he needed to lock it back up after her; he cursed under his breath and, a second later, his feet were on the stairs.

Before he could catch up to her, however, she had stepped from the alcove of his chipped red door and pulled it shut behind her.

Adrenaline was rushing through her, yet the muscles of her legs seemed to absorb none of it. Weakly, she wandered, round the corner and down the side of the building, until she reached the back.

From this point, she would Disapparate. Already, she had one hand in the right-side pocket of her coat, holding her wand, and now all there was to it was a tiny turn on the balls of her feet, a simple spin through the air.

As it was, her body was not inclined to move. To take one more step in any direction, it seemed, would be asking too much.

Against the rough, water-stained stucco wall, Hermione sank slowly to the ground. There, like a wilting Raggedy-Anne doll who had been forgotten on a shelf, she sat and stared out at the river.

Hopelessness: it was far from an unfamiliar feeling. Not the sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach, like a stone in water, but what followed, the stone set to dwell there at the bottom until the end of days; even when the water dried up, that stone stayed, heavy on the ground of an empty canal.

Yet, even in the darkest of hours, she had held out hope for herself. *Missing, presumed dead,* she had thought, willing it to be true.

All she had done, all she had accepted, and all she had let slide, it had been whilst telling herself, *For now.* This phase of her life, whatever it was, would be temporary, because she would return one day and ensure that every degradation she had suffered and every unthinkable act to which she had borne witness would not be for naught.

At last, it was clear: there was no *for now*; there was only *now*.

What did it mean to know one's death was imminent?

This was a question she had asked once before, only she had not asked it about herself. She had wondered instead, sparked by her own morbid curiosity, what Harry had felt in that final hour as he had marched himself into the Forbidden Forest, from which he had believed he would never re-emerge.

It had frightened her back then just how swiftly his mind had been made. What little value had he considered his own life to possess? Had he not felt his heart beating within his chest, pumping blood throughout his body, beseeching him to not let its efforts be for naught?

This was what Hermione felt.

"There you are."

Her eyes flitted toward the voice; Scurvlock stood smoking at the corner of the building a couple of metres away, peering at her over a row of dustbins.

"Spotted you while I was coming out the corner shop."

She wondered what she must look like to him, sprawled there in her fur. In that final hour, Harry had surely looked battle-worn, like a young hero soldiering on toward an honourable end.

Did Hermione look honourable?

As Scurvlock approached her, she pressed a finger to her lips, then pointed to Remus' window above them.

“He thinks I’ve gone,” she murmured numbly.

Scurvlock nodded in understanding. He glanced out across the river, taking a long drag of his cigarette, and then, exhaling the smoke, he put it out with his shoe and lowered himself, with limited ease, to sit beside her.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

Hermione did not care to answer.

A couple of old empty bottles rolled loudly past in the wind, through a stain on the stone of splattered sick. There was something strangely cruel about the sight. Ought the world not look lovelier than ever, knowing one was not long for it?

“You’re not alright, are you, love?” Scurvlock asked quietly.

“No,” she admitted. “I don’t believe I will be.”

“Are you in trouble?”

She glanced at him briefly.

“Not that sort of trouble.”

“I suppose you will say there isn’t anything I can do to help?”

She did not answer. That this was not something that could be helped was too painful to admit aloud.

“Well, I suppose in that case …” Scurvlock muttered eventually, at her silence.

She felt him shift, and a second later, he gave her a nudge; she looked back at him to find he was now holding out his newly-purchased pack of cigarettes, which had *Marlboro* printed, letters tall, tight, and black, in a formal font on the front.

“The medicine that heals no wounds.”

“Would that not be heroine?” she asked doubtfully.

He frowned in thought.

“It would be, wouldn’t it?”

Hermione stared at the pack for a long moment. Yet she did not think about it at all, really; she took the pack and withdrew one.

“Ah,” said Scurvlock awkwardly, “I was jesting, mostly.”

Nevertheless, he retrieved his silver Zippo lighter from a pocket of his grey peacoat and flipped it open. She placed the cigarette between her lips; she did not expect the paper to

cling, but so chapped her lips were that it did. Cupping his hand to protect the thin flame, he leaned in to light it.

“Now, don’t inhale through your mouth as you normally would,” he instructed quickly, as she drew back, her lungs shrinking as though in apprehension. “Pull and hold it for a moment, then breathe in before exhaling.”

She nodded, holding the smoke in until he made a gesture, then she drew the cigarette from her lips, inhaled deeply, and exhaled slowly. Even aware of her actions, it bewildered her to see the smoke blowing away from her face, having issued from her own mouth.

Although the coughing was not immediate, it surely came. Scurvlock chuckled as he lit another for himself.

Soon, her breath steadied, a measured pattern of pull, hold, inhale, and exhale. And Hermione felt brave enough to ask, “Do you ever wish that time would slow down?”

He did not answer for a minute, staring straight ahead. Then he pointed to the river’s edge.

“Sometimes, if I stare at that ledge too long, I can see Skipper there,” he said candidly. “Just as he was on the day, a few weeks shy of twenty-two … When I blink, he’s disappeared … and I know he’s gone overboard.” He looked at her sideways, smiling sorrowfully. “My eyes grow awfully tired when it happens. You see, I try my very best never to blink.”

Hermione turned her head back to stare at the stone ledge, too, with its swinging chain-link barrier. She imagined a young man stood there, laughing under a beaming sun rather than the cloud-ridden sky of the present. He would not have been laughing, though — not on that day. Be that as it may, she could not visualise Skipper any other way.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Time stopped,” said Scurvlock, as if such a thing were a perfectly natural phenomenon. “And it did not restart until his head was above water again. Sound returned, and it struck me suddenly that the middle of the open water was a terrible place for us to be. Time stopped even war for me that day.”

He handed her his Zippo lighter.

“A souvenir,” he said, as she studied it. “Military issued. It’s brushed steel, see — they ran out of the chrome to seal it with when it was still early days. All had to go to the war effort.”

On the front of the lighter, a name was inscribed — *A. Scurlock* — and below it was a message, short and sweet:

Love from home,

Gwen & Jeston

“That’s how I found out I had a son.”

There was no right way to respond to a statement like this, at least not that Hermione could think of at that moment, so mindlessly she took another drag, seeing as it was already in her hand, anyway. She paused after to avoid coughing again, then said, “Gwen was your wife, then?”

“You would have liked her. She was a witty young thing.”

He tapped his cigarette lightly, knocking off the excess ash. Hermione copied him.

“For the first several years or so after the war, Skipper was looked after by his mother,” he went on, with a sigh. “Mrs Pendry was in bad health, though, and once his sister Carys had gotten a bit older, she took him on, let their mother rest … Then, after a time, Carys got herself a fella. They made plans to settle down, the two, and those plans did not involve Skipper. So, he moved in with us.”

He shook his head ruefully.

“Do you know what the trouble is with witty young things?” he asked rhetorically, in a voice so very low. “They can always be counted upon to say what they see. And Gwen saw what she saw, even if she didn’t see a thing.”

Hermione took a deep breath at that.

Him and Skipper. She was surprised that she had missed it. Then again, she supposed this had been the intention. Although legal for men their age, it remained entirely otherwise to show it in public.

“My boy’s a doctor in London now, you know,” Scurvlock informed her impressively. “He’s got his mother’s brains, bless him. I boast about him near every chance I get, and I’m not choosey about who I’m boasting about him to — the drive when I get a cab, the boy who gets my groceries off the shelves I cannot seem to reach anymore, the nurse who checks up on Skipper …”

He gave her another smile, but this time, it wobbled.

“It shames me more than it saddens me to admit, but the only reason I know he became a doctor is because I looked him up … saw the *M.D.* after his name … It’s been twenty-three years since he followed Gwen out the door, and I haven’t seen either of them since.”

“You must miss him terribly,” said Hermione softly.

“*Terribly* does not even begin to cover it,” he replied, as she gazed at him in distraught. “But he has had his mother; he has never been alone in the world. And I can be grateful for that even if his world is one in which I am not welcome. I care more that he is happy than that I get to see his happiness for myself.”

She hoped she would be able to look at it like that, too, one day.

It was silent for a while, as they sat there together and alone, and their cigarettes shortened to stubs. Scurvlock instructed her to put it out with the toe of her boot, then flicked the remains away, adding to the litter by the bins. She did not bother to admonish him.

“Now,” he said finally, “that was a fair sight more than a penny’s worth of my thoughts. Tell me some of yours.”

Of its own accord, Hermione’s mind went to terminal patients in hospital beds, their side-tables filled with flowers and well-wishing cards signed by their loved ones, because what else was there to leave at someone’s deathbed? A friend of her grandfather’s, she recalled hearing, had requested a visit from a priest for a confessional. It left her wondering now, *Is this it? Is this the moment in which I’m meant to confess all my sins?*

She was guilty of too many; she did not know if she had the breath left to spare.

Besides, even if she had, her sins were not those which could be spoken aloud, not to anyone who lived in the here and now. The tightrope of travelling through time was too precarious a phenomenon to be able to withstand a teeter of truth.

Her confessions were supposed to be saved for the future, wherein she could give them to the people to whom she most egregiously owed an apology. This had been the plan. There would be no such confessions, however, nor such apologies. This future would come to pass, just not for her.

She supposed, then, that she would die in silence.

Like a proper Nott, she thought humourlessly.

She looked at Scurvlock — at his horn-rimmed glasses, his tired eyes crinkled with concern.

“You remind me of my father-in-law, you know.”

“I do sincerely hope that’s a compliment,” said Scurvlock.

“It is,” Hermione assured him, trying to smile. “I love him very much. You have the same glasses as him. And the same kind words that are never too much and never too little.”

He smiled back at her, worn and wrinkled and achingly warm.

“I want you to know, Scurvlock, how grateful I am for your kind words,” she told him solemnly, and she could feel her voice catching. “I — I won’t ever hear his again.”

“Oh, love …” he breathed, his white brows drawing together in consternation. “I’m sorry.”

Two simple words spoken with such simple ease, as though all one had to do was open one’s mouth and say them. She was immediately envious of him for his ability to do so.

It’s not fair.

And how fiercely this thought stung. Was it even true? Did she even deserve fairness after all these years? Whether she did or not, the thought persisted.

It's not fucking fair.

Hermione had done everything that she was supposed to do to maintain the timeline, and this was what she got for her efforts? Another box to be checked off? The very last item on the timeline-preservation to-do list: *Die.*

In the distance, the sun had begun its descent, a hazy orb of orange glow grazing the line of rooftops that spanned the other side of the river. Before the hour was up, it would slip behind that row of buildings and be swept from sight.

If she sat here long enough, she would watch it happen, and she would know with every inch gone another would follow, and she would not be surprised when she could no longer see the sun. That it would always set was a fact that she had been told many, many years ago.

Nevertheless, she did not have it within herself to watch it go.

Using the wall for support, she got unsteadily to her feet. She gazed down at Scurvlock, her mouth dry and soured by the smoke.

"Thank you for the chat," she said feebly.

Scurvlock pretended to tip a non-existent hat to her.

"Anytime, love."

She tried to smile at him, just a small one, just one more time, but she could not manage it, so she turned and left.

Her coat felt heavy on her shoulders, her feet hard to lift. She paused at the sign at the corner — *Wanderers Street* — and felt suddenly as though she were a lost soul even now, whilst she still breathed.

She swallowed thickly and kept moving forward.

Just one foot in front of the other, she told herself, and soon, she had crossed the street. Just one foot in front of the other, and she was starting up Whistler Way toward a laneway from which she could safely Disapparate. Just one foot in front of the other, because there was nothing else to do.

Just one foot in front of the other, twisting into thin air, because there was nowhere else to go, either.

The sun was still descending even here, its glow emanating from the sharp edges of the towering house like a halo of warmth. Hermione stalked toward it, hanging her head beneath its lengthening shadow.

Inside the front doors, Goppy awaited her with one wrinkled hand extended to accept her wand. She relinquished it automatically.

“Dinner is being served at seven o’clock in the informal dining room, Mistress,” he informed her, in a deep, hoarse voice. “Master Tavaris is to be returning shortly and will not be wishing to eat in the kitchen.”

“That’s fine,” she said hollowly.

He stretched out his hand again, as though waiting for something. The creases on his forehead deepened when she did not immediately sort out what this something was.

“Your coat, Mistress?” he prompted.

“Oh. Right.” She shrugged out of her coat and let him heave it in a big bundle of fur into his thin arms. “Thank you, Goppy.”

“Of course, Mistress.” Goppy straightened from his bow to regard her uncertainly for a second, hesitating, before he disappeared with a *pop* to stow her belongings away.

Hermione drifted toward the staircase, repeating to herself, *Just one foot in front of the other.* But her feet had already carried her so far, and they would not carry her any further. She sat down on the second-last step, and from this spot, she stared blindly out at the empty, candlelit front hall.

Suddenly, the room felt too vast, too dark, like a pit down which she was actively falling.

“Ma?”

Hermione closed her eyes, despising their sting.

Tiny feet came pattering down the stairs. Within seconds, a pair of skinny arms were wrapping around her neck from behind.

“You were gone *ages* …” Theodore bemoaned, in a squished mumble against her cheek. “I’ve been missing you ever since *breakfast*.”

Her face began to crumple. She pressed her lips together tightly, refusing to make a sound, too afraid of what that sound might be — or worse, if it might come out a shout for him to get away.

Because without him there, without him at her side, she might have a while longer.

“Why’ve you got your eyes closed, Ma?” he asked confusedly, lifting his chin from her shoulder. “Are you scared?”

He’s going to watch me die.

“Were you missing me, too? Because you don’t have to be scared about that anymore. I’m right here,” he reassured her. “I was here the whole time you were gone, waiting for you to

come back."

Hugo will be waiting, too. Rose will be waiting. Ron.

Her shoulders began to shake with the force it took to keep the sound from escaping. She pressed a hand over her mouth, doubling over in pain. Theodore kept holding onto her, his arms now straining at her neck; it became harder to breathe.

"Gentler, please," she wanted to tell him. "That's too tight." But she could not open her mouth, or it would all come pouring out.

Harry. Ginny. Mum. Dad.

"You smell like Pa. Is he home already?"

As if on cue, the *whoosh* of the Floo sounded from the next room. Theodore's arms loosened and drew away.

"Pa!" he called out urgently. "Pa, hurry! Ma's hurting!"

Teddy. James. Albus. Lily.

"It's gonna be OK, Ma," he promised, his voice soft at her ear. "Pa *always* heals you, remember?"

A whimper slipped out from between her fingers. She bit down hard on her lips, feeling her face twist.

Victoire. Dominique. Louis. Bill. Fleur.

Steadily nearing were the tiny *thuds* of Tavaris' walking-stick, growing louder and clearer, and stopping somewhere in front of her.

"What happened?" she heard him ask.

"I think she got scared because she missed me so much," Theodore explained concernedly, keeping one small hand on her shoulder. "I told her it's OK now because I'm here but she's still closing her eyes."

"All right," said Tavaris, after a small pause. "Go to your room, Theodore. I've got her now. Dinky — stay with him."

Fred. Roxanne. George. Angelina.

Theodore's voice was at her ear again. "Just think of your favourite things, OK, Ma? Then you won't feel so bad."

Molly. Lucy. Percy. Audrey.

She gave him a tight nod.

Tavaris must have made some gesture or expression of impatience then, because Theodore let out a little huff before turning back up the stairs, his feet pattering again. A moment later, a door above was closed.

Then came the even, apprehensive *thud ... thud ... thud ...*

She felt Tavaris join her, his arm brushing against her own before wrapping firmly around her.

Arthur. Molly. Charlie.

"Mione," he said, in a subdued voice. His thumb stroked her shoulder blade. "Mione, what happened?"

Neville. Hannah.

She shook her head roughly against her knees.

Luna. Rolf. Lorcan. Lysander.

"Darling, I cannot help you if you do not tell me what … what the problem …" He trailed off, sniffing, and abruptly, his thumb stilled its stroking. His fingers tightened round her shoulder. "Why do you smell like smoke?"

Andromeda. Hagrid. Crookshanks.

Soft fur brushed against her ankle, twirling round it like a tail. Crookshanks let out a low, sorrowful whine and began rubbing his face against her leg, nudging insistently.

Hermione whimpered against her hand, squeezing her eyes shut still, but then her breath stuttered, her lips parted on a gasp, and out it all poured.

They'll be waiting forever.

The sound, it turned out, was a wail wrenched from deep within her gut and dragged upward, scraping against her throat and unhinging her jaw, tearing itself from her mouth. She keeled over with the force of it. Only Tavaris' hand on her shoulder kept her head from hitting the floor, drawing it to his good knee instead.

The sound, it turned out, was that of a dying animal.

On and on, it was all she could seem to do, her fingers digging into the leg of his trousers for something to cling to, or perhaps claw at, her nails sinking in. He held her tightly to him, smoothing her hair back out of her face and drawing away the fine strands that stuck to her skin with tears or snot or spit.

Cries of grief rang with screeching echoes throughout the hall — grief for herself, and grief for people who did not yet know to miss her, who did not yet know that she had been missing them.

And she could not explain it, not to anyone. She could not explain that her arms felt unbearably empty, as though in a moment of weakness a child had been torn straight from them, carried away out of reach, out of sight. Never to return.

She could not explain that she would never again see the bright gleam of her daughter's blue eyes when they lit up with secret mirth, smell her son's hair after he had just woken up, soft and warm with the same scent she had breathed in the day he had been born, her nose pressed to the top of his head, or feel the weight of a long arm, freckled and scarred, slung over her chest whilst she slept.

She could not explain that she would never get the chance to tell her best friend about how sorry she was, for the role she had played, for the harm she had done to him, personally, through her actions and inactions. Nor that she would never be able to apologise to Kingsley Shacklebolt or Dean Thomas for sentencing Orvyn Shacklebolt to death, or to Teddy for the hurt that she had caused his father. She could not put into words the fact that she would never be able to apologise to Ron for the line that she had toed.

She could not explain, truthfully, that she would never again feel the press of her mother's kiss on her forehead or the all-encompassing safety of her father's embrace.

She could not explain, so she continued to cry out in wordless despair, the sound of which, at least, might be understood.

It was unclear how many minutes it took — how long in his floundering that he allowed the moment to drag excruciatingly on — before Tavaris resorted to summoning Goppy to fetch a Calming Draught.

A hauntingly familiar sensation, not to mention scene, as it pooled in her stomach and seeped into her bloodstream, as her heart slowed and her breath steadied.

Hermione slumped against him, spent.

Her throat ached vaguely. As she opened her eyes, blinking, she felt her final few tears fall away from her.

As it turned out, not much time could have passed at all, for the last light of day had yet to slip away; playing before her bleary eyes on the dark parquet floor were the multicoloured reflections of the stairwell's large stained-glass window. At this height alone, for no more or less than fifteen minutes of its rise and its set, did the sun hit the right angle to bleed through here — a stream of violets, blues, reds, and oranges.

The colours danced across Crookshanks' fur as he laid curled at her feet, whining with worry still and nuzzling her ankle. Hermione dragged her fingernails dully along the scruff of his neck.

"Now, tell me what happened," Tavaris said.

Once more, he brushed her hair out of her face, as gentle as he could ever prove himself capable.

“I saw something that reminded me of someone,” she answered eventually, without knowing that she would. The lie was mechanic, told in a hoarse voice. “Someone whom I shall never see again … I … I didn’t expect it to hit me all at once like that.”

“This was not all at once,” he said sagely, stroking her hair still. “Grief comes in waves, for to come all at once it would drown a person in its depths.”

“It’s not fair,” she whispered.

“What’s not fair?” he asked. “Life?”

She nodded against his knee.

“Life has never pretended to be fair, darling.”

Against her temple, she felt the cool metallic press of the silver band on his ring finger. Yet again, she was forced to acknowledge what she had not before; even if she were to go missing, she would never be presumed dead so long as that ring remained fixed on his finger.

Till death would they part.

A distant envy filled Hermione, dimmed by quieting elixir, and it was envy of Harry.

He had had less than an hour to live between discovering he had to die and actually dying. He had also known how he would die, and with this knowledge, he had been able to brace himself for that flash of green light. He had needed to walk only from the Headmaster’s Office to a clearing in the Forbidden Forest, and then the pain of knowing, the pain of anticipating, had been over.

How far would Hermione have to walk?

All week, she imagined the ways in which she might die.

Perhaps she would Splinch herself, she thought as she watched Tavaris Disapparate beyond the gates to go to work, become too distracted amid Apparation, her mind filled not with her destination but with thoughts of tearing through the air with the Dark Lord, his cold laughter ringing in her ear. She would land, perhaps, too far away from anyone who could heal her in time, and she would bleed out there, on the ground, another piece of her left behind for someone else to find. Maybe Remus would find it. Maybe Scurvlock or Skipper. A lone leg on the pavement, as had happened to a sixteen-year-old Susan Bones in their very first Apparation lesson.

Perhaps she would choke on something, she thought as she pushed the food about on her plate, and Tavaris would be travelling, leaving no one strong enough to perform the Heimlich manoeuvre to force the morsel of food out and no one with a wand to cast *Anapneo* to clear her airway; death by asphyxiation. Maybe it would be a bit of asparagus. Maybe something as small as a pea.

Perhaps she would have a heart attack, she thought after missing a step going down the stairs and just barely managing to catch herself on the railing, unaware of some pre-existing

condition and thus unprepared to prevent its consequences. Or a stroke even, able to recognise the signs when her left side went numb but unable to call for help, her mouth drooping too much at the corner to speak coherently, let alone yell coherently.

Perhaps there was a tumour in her brain, she thought when she woke up with a migraine, right now, expanding, or a cyst, fit to burst, and without an MRI, no one would ever know before it was too late. Perhaps it would be the resulting neurological damage that did her in.

No matter the scenario, Theodore would be there.

Thinking about it made her feel claustrophobic, as though the room were actively shrinking, its four walls beginning to close in on her, shrinking and shrinking and closing and closing until she was squished right where she sat.

“Why are you so sad, Lady Mione?” asked a soft, timid voice on her left, drawing her from her thoughts.

Hermione turned her head to meet Daphne’s gaze, her misty eyes slightly too big for her face and bigger still with concern.

Today, somehow, she looked just like Victoire at this age.

“I’m not sad,” Hermione lied. “I’m just a little bit tired, is all.”

“I’m tired, too,” said Pansy on her right, with an exaggerated sigh of exhaustion.

“Me, three!” said Draco eagerly, going up on his knees. “So we should probably stop doing the puzzle now, since we’re so tired.”

Louis had hair like him, almost.

With too-perfect timing, Daphne yawned widely.

Pansy slumped against Hermione’s side, as though too spent to stay upright. It reminded her so much of Rose that she half-expected Pansy to open her mouth and say, “I reckon I’d better to go straight to bed now, Mummy, I’m much to sleepy to eat my sprouts.”

Her own eyelids weighing heavily, Hermione wrapped an arm around her, then around Daphne, when she copied Pansy in pretending to nod off.

Theodore, in contrast, looked panicked.

“I’m not tired!” he insisted. “Please, Ma, don’t make us put the puzzle away! I’m not finished yet!”

Hermione stared back at him, feeling cold.

No matter the scenario she imagined, Theodore would be there, and there were only so many places that Theodore could be: the Nott Estate, Nottingham Hall, and Malfoy Manor.

Dear God, she thought as she laid in bed that night, gazing up at the ceiling in desperate despair, *please don't let me die in Malfoy Manor.*

As if the death of one's mother was not bad enough — to witness it was a horror that she could never hope to define. He was just a child. He had already seen too much. Why would fate be so cruel as to make him see more?

A silly question, for it was no secret that fate had always been a cruel master. Hermione had been stupid to think that she could ever stand a chance at controlling it.

She rolled over in bed to gaze at the clock on her bedside table. Painted onto the face was the black silhouette of a small boy, one who lived secretly within the clock itself: Hugo.

Her eyes flitted frequently to the vase of yellow roses beside it, and nearly as often, to the Chudley Cannons poster pasted on the wall — other remnants of her family, the best she could manage to scrounge up. Perhaps she could get a Holyhead Harpies poster to go alongside the first, for Ginny, and a Golden Snitch in a glass display case to put on a shelf, for Harry.

Crookshanks pawed at her leg to get her attention.

Hermione dragged her eyes from the clock.

She reached out to scratch behind his ears. Just as soon as she had, however, he leapt off the bed. She watched him make his way across the bedroom floor, stopping a few times to glance back at her, as though to ensure that he still held her attention.

Upon reaching the desk, he began to scratch at its small cupboard door in askance.

Eventually, and rather inexplicably, he managed to get it open himself. He promptly began digging through the contents of the cupboard, knocking scrolls of parchment, spare quills, and even a book out onto the floor.

A powder-blue journal landed with a soft *thwap* on the carpet.

Hermione gave a weary sigh as he emerged from the cupboard to sit staunchly with one paw on the cover of the journal.

"That's no use to me anymore, Crooks," she mumbled tiredly.

Crookshanks mewled stubbornly in response.

Heaving another sigh, she crawled out of bed and shuffled over to join him on the carpet. Mechanically, she began tidying the mess.

He continued to paw at the journal, giving her what could only be described as an impatient look, his tail swishing furiously and little huffs issuing from his nose.

"I can't," she told him, in a voice laden with regret. "I was an idiot for ever believing otherwise."

At this point, she was beginning to doubt if she had ever truly believed it in the first place, because, as she realised — or rather, as she finally allowed herself to realise — she had known this would happen. She had known it for years, ever since she had learned whom she would be in this time, because there was only one thing she had known about the mother of Theodore Nott.

For years, Hermione had been mourning herself. Through the stages of grief, she had gone. It was clear to see, looking back.

Denial: Mione Nott was missing, presumed dead. Anger: at herself, for winding up where she had, and at Theodore, for making it possible. Bargaining: she would return to the future, her abrupt absence so unexplainable the answer to it could only be death, perhaps she could even fake it. Depression: she had fulfilled her purpose, lost her use; one misstep could mean the end of her.

And now came the final stage.

Hermione could hope all she wanted. She could tell herself that it had been someone else whose death Theodore had borne witness to. She could even go as far as to plan the details of her own demise; a trail of clues that she could leave in her wake which would lead everyone to believe the reason for her absence stretched beyond a missing persons case. The fact remained that she could be wrong. The events of the last six years had proven that she often was.

And if she was wrong, and she truly was destined to die, there was nothing she could do. The chain of events had already been set in motion, and at the same time, would not be set in motion for many years more. A death that had not yet been orchestrated was unpreventable, unless she were to prevent the orchestrators themselves from living long enough to complete the task.

But how could she?

Without their continued existence, the future she knew would not come to pass. Even if this were not the case, she could not forget: these orchestrators were people she knew.

Of course, maintaining the future aside, she could likely put an end to Antonin Dolohov and Augustus Rookwood without succumbing to guilt or regret — perhaps whoever had started that research on time-related magic, too, if she could only sort out whom they were. But, though it made her insides squirm to admit it, she did not know if she had it within herself to kill Tavaris. Besides, if the others were not alive to conduct the research, Theodore would never go on to construct a Time-Turner, without which he would have never been born.

And Theodore, she would never; she could never.

As much as she wished it to be, this was not an equation that she could solve. There was no way to consider any one part of it objectively. For better or for worse, these were people she knew.

Hermione stilled, her eyes caught on the book that had been knocked out of the desk from Crookshanks' scavenging — *Hogwarts: A History.*

Once more, the thought repeated itself, now accompanied by a different feeling entirely — one that ignited within the cold, hollow pit of her stomach and surged upward to consume every restless nerve in her brain.

People she knew.

Because she did know them; she knew them all. She knew their names and the crimes that had never been attached to them. She knew the answers to the questions that lived on in a dust-coated cabinet filled with over a decade's worth of cold cases, all because they had put on a performance and, unwittingly, sat her in the front row.

It rushed into her with a force that set her blood aflame: the realisation that there was, in fact, something she could still do. This plan for revenge need not die with her. She merely had to be more creative about executing it.

Inside the journal, she found a list with a title that she alone was capable of deciphering, and that title was *W.F.*.

Walked Free.

So foolish, they had all been, to think that she could ever be silenced. So regretful, they would all be, for allowing her the knowledge that they had, believing her to be someone else.

Because she was not only Mione Greenwood and Lady Nott; she was also Hermione Granger, and if there was one true thing that could be said about Hermione Granger, it was that the answers she found, she never failed to share.

With a shaking hand, she opened *Hogwarts: A History* to its first page, on which the Hogwarts crest was printed. Draped over the crest like a banner was the motto: *Draco Dormiens Nunquam Titillandus*.

"*Oh*," she breathed, with a slowly creeping smirk, "Crookshanks, you clever, clever cat … Where on earth would I be without you?"

For the first time in nearly six years, Hermione was certain what to do, and exactly how to do it. It formed around her, that certainty, like iron welded by the fire to which they had all added fuel, again, and again, and again, and now, it had become armour.

When she went down, she would see to it that she took every last one of them with her.

*

On Saturday morning, Hermione rose with purpose. She ate early and without dawdling, washed up, combed and twisted her hair back neatly, applied her makeup carefully, dressed in sheer stockings, a slim-fitting lilac dress, and a set of steel-coloured robes with a stately silhouette, and buckled a pair of low grey heels — all in a concerted effort to bear not even

the faintest resemblance to Bellatrix, but, in truth, to bear the resemblance of someone else entirely.

Herself.

Soon, Hermione was setting off down the cobblestone street, armed with a double-edged sword, for if she was fated to fall on it, then it was only fair that she should have a go at wielding it first.

And she was at last ready to start swinging.

Straight ahead, her eyes stayed, never strayed, fixed on that place where, down below, sleeping dragons laid.

The morning was grey, the risen sun a cool brightness that seeped through the clouded sky above. But dimness be damned, the grand bronze doors of Gringotts Bank still glinted in the light. Its marble floors, too, gleamed, her heels an echoing *click* against them when she entered, the doors opened wordlessly for her at her approach by the goblins who stood stoic guard on either side.

Few people filled the bank at its hour of opening, some of the tellers still settling in behind the long counters. She spotted Ricbert among them and made a beeline straight for him.

“Good morning, Ricbert,” she said politely, handing over her cedar wand for inspection.

She forced herself to say no more and waited anxiously as he scrutinised the wand.

“Good day, Lady Nott,” said Ricbert finally, a minute later, lifting his glinting black gaze to look at her. He returned her wand, then twisted in his seat to summon another goblin to escort her.

It was Ragnok again; it always was when she happened to join Tavaris in visiting the Nott family vault. Just as politely, she greeted him, and without another word, he was leading her across the vast hall and into the stone passageway beyond.

The moment the doors shut behind them, Hermione halted.

“There is no need to summon a cart, sir,” she said, just as he brought his fingers to his mouth to whistle. “I have not come here today with the intention of visiting any vault.”

Ragnok faced her slowly.

“Then what is it you have come here to do?”

“I was hoping the Head Goblin might be available to speak to,” Hermione said boldly. “I have a business proposal for him.”

A small smirk grew on Ragnok’s face.

“Is that so?” he said, his voice dripping with condescension. “The Head Goblin is a very busy individual, Lady Nott. It would be unwise to waste his time. What might this proposal concern?”

She reached into a pocket of her cloak and retrieved a single gold hairpin embedded with rubies that glittered in the torchlight.

“It concerns the matter of so-called *heirlooms*,” she told him meaningfully, showing him the hairpin. “This is goblin-made, commissioned by Godric Gryffindor to be given as a gift to Sweterun Nott. It has remained in the Nott family for over nine centuries.”

The smirk was wiped off Ragnok’s face. He stared at the hairpin, his eyes narrowing to slits. For a split-second, she thought that he might snatch it out of her hand. If he had, she would not be able to do what she did next: extend her arm and hold it out in offer.

“I should think it is high time that it was returned to its original owners.”

He glanced up at her quickly, his expression full of disbelief.

Not at once did he speak, nor did he accept the hairpin from her grasp. After a moment, however, he turned and placed the palm of one hand against the wall; almost immediately, several of the stones dissolved, leaving in their wake a short, narrow archway.

“If you would please follow me, Lady Nott.”

Hermione did, ducking her head to fit under the arch. In an instant, it sealed shut behind her, the stones rematerializing. Without looking back, she followed Ragnok down a cramped passageway lit by more torches, careful not to bump her head on the low ceiling. This path was obviously intended for goblins alone.

In less than a minute, they emerged in the middle of a brightly-lit corridor with white marble floors. Portraits of Head Goblins of the past lined the panelled walls, each sunless face displaying a differing degree of suspicion. On the right were doors that she knew to lead out to the hall; she had entered through them before, many years ago.

Ragnok turned left and led the way up a steep, slim staircase to the first floor, where the offices were located. He stopped just outside a door with a gleaming gold plaque.

Cogthorn

Head Goblin of Gringotts Wizarding Bank

He knocked once, sharply, and waited with his hands clasped behind his back. His eyes darted up at Hermione every few seconds as if to check that she was not doing anything dodgy.

“Enter,” said a gravelly voice from within the office.

Ragnok opened the door and, rather than hold it, left it open for her to enter after him. She shut it gently behind herself as her gaze roamed the richly-decorated office, with its plush, burgundy carpet and mahogany shelves which displayed all manner of bejewelled and bedazzling peculiarities the likes of which Abraxas and Lucius would both surely wish to get their grubby hands on.

Behind the large desk sat the wizened, grey-haired Head Goblin, Cogthorn, who had a great pointed chin and a harshly lined face. His eyes raked over Hermione in distrust as Ragnok approached to whisper in his ear. Even the words that she managed to make out were unintelligible, for they were spoken in Gobbledegook.

The exchange was cut short a moment later when Cogthorn nodded his head and held up a hand to signal to Ragnok that no further explanation was required.

Ragnok shot Hermione one last measuring look and saw himself out, shutting the door sharply.

“Sit,” said Cogthorn, gesturing to the straight-backed chair in front of him. She sat down, crossing her legs, and he extended his hand over the desk. “May I?”

Without hesitation, she handed over the hairpin. Her heart was beating very fast.

For several long minutes, she watched him inspect it under the lens of a magnifying glass before he seemed to draw the conclusion that it was legitimate. He put down the magnifying glass to survey her instead, arching one wispy brow.

“This is … quite unprecedented,” he sneered, his voice a rough, scraping baritone. “It is not every day that a witch or wizard enters this bank with the intention of returning one of our stolen treasures — in fact, it is never.”

He squinted at her curiously.

“You must have wished to speak with me very badly.”

“I did, yes,” she said honestly.

“How bizarre,” he mused. He made a sweeping gesture of invitation. “By all means, Lady Nott, tell me of this business proposal you have in mind.”

Hermione straightened her spine, steeling herself.

“Well, first of all, I think you ought to call me by my real name.”

Cogthorn’s expression darkened instantly.

“You are not who you claim?” he said, in a low voice.

“Not quite,” she confessed, pushing past her anxiety. “Allow me to introduce myself properly.

“I was born here in London on September the nineteenth of nineteen-seventy-nine to Drs William and Helen Granger — Muggles. I am the wife of Ronald Bilius Weasley, who was born on March the first of nineteen-eighty, and the mother of Rose and Hugo Granger-Weasley, who will be born on October the twenty-first of two-thousand-six and May the sixteenth of two-thousand-eight, respectively. I was educated at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry from nineteen-ninety-one to ‘ninety-nine, and I have a Mastery in Magical Law which I achieved studying under current-Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt. I have founded an organisation known as the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare which protects the rights and well-being of all house-elves in Britain, I have headed the Office of House-Elf Relocation at the British Ministry of Magic, and both helped to reinstate and run Werewolf Support Services. I have also served as the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

“I am Minister for Magic Hermione Jean Granger, Order of Merlin, First Class. I have come from the year twenty-twenty.”

And what a stupendous silence did follow.

Whatever Cogthorn had expected her to say, it had most certainly not been this. His jaw did not drop, to be sure, but his mouth stayed parted for much longer than any goblin’s mouth typically did when they were not baring their pointed teeth.

“I could provide you with further information, if necessary,” Hermione went on, after the silence had lasted a beat longer than was comfortable, “but I am afraid none of it will be immediately verifiable, and as it stands, I am on a bit of a crunch for time. Of course, I could tell you what legislature you can expect to go through within the coming months, but it would only be reasonable for you to believe that I have an inside source on the goings-on of the Wizengamot. Ideally, I would be able to tell you the outcome of some inconsequential Quidditch match but … well … that simply isn’t within my capabilities. I mean, the Chudley Cannons will finish at the bottom of this year’s league,” she added, in an afterthought, “but really, everyone knows that.”

She tried, with difficulty, to not start fidgeting.

Finally, Cogthorn appeared to gather his wits about himself. He sat forward to lean over the desk.

“Nineteen-seventy-nine, you say?” he clarified, seeming dubious. “And you claim to have travelled here from the year *two-thousand-and-twenty* …” The way it sounded dragging off his tongue, it was as though the year were a foreign word of which he did not know the meaning. “This would make you —”

“Forty-eight years old,” she finished for him, nodding shortly. “Professor Albus Dumbledore provided me with an exceptionally powerful De-Ageing Potion upon my arrival in this time. He is the only person whom I informed of the truth of how I came to be here — that is, until today.”

“Why is that you *do* share it today, with me?” asked Cogthorn.

“It is precisely as I said, sir,” she replied simply. “I have a business proposal.”

“I’m listening.”

Hermione chose her words with care.

“To begin, I will tell you that in this future, a rather infamous sword crafted by King Ragnuk the First comes back into the rightful possession of the goblins.”

“You are promising us the return of the so boldly titled ‘Sword of Gryffindor’?” asked Cogthorn doubtfully.

“I am promising you much more than that, sir,” she said.

He leaned back in his chair, steepling his long fingers.

“Go on.”

“How many goblin-made *heirlooms* would you estimate to be in the possession of a wizarding family such as … the Malfoys, for instance?” Hermione asked, gazing at him knowingly. “Or, per say, the Traverses, the Rosiers, the Selwyns, the Rowles …” at the growing gleam in his black eyes, she kept going, “… the Parkinsons, the Carrows, the Yaxleys … or, say, the Notts, who have been collecting items such as these since the reign of King Ragnuk the First …”

“Dozens, perhaps,” said Cogthorn. “Likely more.”

“What if we were to combine them all?” she asked. “What would your estimate be then?”

“Hundreds,” he croaked.

“Hypothetically speaking,” she continued delicately, “how much do you suppose one might have to pay in restitution for providing an entire dowry as funding for the Dark Lord’s regime? Gold, properties, heirlooms … held and hidden away, perhaps, in a Gringotts vault. Or, say, for committing murder on his behalf? Multiple murders, some even of Ministry officials, committed by fellow Ministry employees, on Ministry time. What if the same could be said of a Healer? What if they used resources from St Mungo’s Hospital to do it? What if — and here’s the real kicker — someone guilty of crimes such as these was the last of their name?”

Cogthorn regarded her shrewdly for a very long moment. Then he folded his hands and said at last, “What can we do for you, Minister?”

She held back a sigh of relief.

“I’d like you to help me open a vault under the name Harry James Potter,” she told him clearly, “and I’d like you to conceal it from him until November the third of twenty-twenty.”

If Cogthorn was at all surprised, he did not show it this time.

“And what is it you intend to put in this vault,” he asked, “if I am correct in assuming it is not gold?”

Hermione leaned back in her chair.

“Something far more valuable: names.”

Chapter End Notes

Welcome at last to the plot of Part Two;)

Vault 712

Chapter Summary

Turn my sorrow into treasured gold
You'll pay me back in kind and reap just what you sow
(You're gonna wish you never had met me)
— Rolling in the Deep, Adele

Chapter Notes

I suspect you'll enjoy this...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was one of the more foolish things a person could do: cut a deal with a goblin. Hermione knew this very well. She simply did not care.

She was sick of the devil cutting her deals for her.

The office of the Gringotts Head Goblin was brimming with bodies and voices both. Exchanges made in Gobbledegook were whispered and shouted in turn as a dozen goblins debated the proposal with which they had just been presented.

Hermione stayed seated and had stayed seated since Head Goblin Cogthorn had stepped out to summon several of his colleagues approximately fifteen minutes ago. Her nerves were practically vibrating with the tension of waiting, but she had thought this through; she was confident of their answer, despite the fact that they had not yet settled on it themselves.

She knew how the Goblin Nation operated. If this were to go her way, it was vital that it went their way as well.

One goblin stood glowering whilst he was growled at by an older, balding goblin, who was gesturing emphatically to Sweterun Nott's gold hairpin. At the same time, another goblin was whipping out a magnifying glass to give the hairpin a thorough inspection of his own.

Standing nearest to Hermione was Ragnok, who seemed to be providing three other goblins some heated explanation, the singular word of which she caught was "Notts," as this was the same in Gobbledegook as it was in English. Among these three goblins was Ricbert and Griphook, the latter of whom would one day assist Hermione, Ron, and Harry in breaking into the bank. Griphook was nodding along pensively to whatever Ragnok was saying.

It was Bogrod — the poor goblin who would, in the break-in, be put under the Imperius Curse — who first addressed Hermione.

"What do you seek to obtain from this deal?" he inquired, studying her with no shortage of suspicion. "I understand how it will benefit us, but what information appears to be missing from your explanation is how it will benefit *you*."

"To be frank, sir, I won't be around to reap the rewards, so to speak," Hermione said, running her thumb absently round the large emerald of the silver wedding band she wore. "When I first heard of him in the future, Tavaris Nott had already been a widower for quite some time."

Bogrod jerked his head back in surprise. Beside him, Ragnok had fallen silent. He, Ricbert, Griphook, and the other goblin all twisted to look at her.

"Do you mean to tell us that the Lady Mione Nott is to die?" asked Ricbert, and four more goblins stopped speaking to listen in.

Hermione swallowed thickly.

"I don't know how or when, exactly, but …" She nodded her head once, tensely. "Yes. She dies."

The whole office quieted. The goblin with the magnifying glass straightened up to stare at her, still holding the lens over one white-less eye.

"Seeing as she and I have turned out to be the same person," said Hermione tightly, "it follows that … Well, I should think the conclusion I'm attempting to draw here is rather self-explanatory."

Several significant looks were exchanged.

"So you are unaware of what sort of timeline we have to work with here?" said one goblin, who was stroking his goatee thoughtfully. "That is, if we elect to go through with this."

"I had heard that Theodore Nott — my son — had lost his mother before he started at Hogwarts," Hermione explained, "which he will in nineteen-ninety-one. That gives us roughly seven years, at most."

"And at least?" asked Ricbert prudently.

She exhaled shakily.

"I suppose that depends on how long this meeting will last."

Ricbert let out a slightly startled guffaw.

"But as I asked before, Minister, this begs the question," Bogrod pointed out keenly. "What do *you* get out of this?"

“Justice,” said Hermione.

Griphook narrowed his eyes perceptively.

“*And*?”

She pursed her lips.

“Revenge,” she said coldly.

Cogthorn nodded his head with authority.

“We can work with that,” he decided.

He rounded the desk, the other goblins shuffling out of his way, and stopped directly in front of her. He stuck out his hand.

Hermione would have preferred to have it in writing, considering how slippery a goblin was wont to be. Ideally, they would negotiate the matter at length to construct a meticulous contract for both Cogthorn and herself to sign. To leave behind any hard evidence of this dealing, however, was a risk that she was unwilling to take.

She glanced pointedly at Cogthorn’s other hand, which was concealed behind his back. Smiling toothily, he brought it up to prove that he didn’t have his fingers crossed.

It will have to do, she thought, and she shook his hand.

“We will have a vault prepared to your specifications by end of day,” Cogthorn said. “Upon your next visit, assuming there shall be a next, that is where you will be escorted. Do you have anything with you now to place there?”

Hermione nodded. From within her robes, she retrieved her journal, filled with names and with stories, too; descriptions that she had once written of the Potters and the Lupins, as well as of Christmas with the Evans, for Harry and Teddy to one day read and know not only their parents but also their grandparents.

“It’s just this for now,” she told Cogthorn, handing him the journal. “I plan to return with more.”

He accepted the journal with a greedy glint in his eyes. He ran his hand along the spine.

“There was a family of goblins,” he said quietly, after a moment. “They lived just outside Nottingham. He Who Must Not Be Named had them slaughtered.”

A white-haired goblin who stood alone in the far corner coughed into his fist.

“Odbert’s daughter,” Cogthorn said, glancing at him grimly. “Ragnory. Her husband Naglok and his father Grinkus … and Ragnory and Naglok’s four children …” He turned back to Hermione. “We would like to know the culprits.”

She met Odbert's gaze from across the office.

"I'll do my best to find them for you," she vowed.

Not much more was said after that. Hermione informed them of her intention to return to the bank the following Saturday to add more information to her journal now that it would be secure from the most dangerous of prying eyes, for what she had been able to write thus far was severely lacking. There were a few muttered exchanges of Gobbledegook intermingled with crooked grins, bared teeth, and expressions of eery triumph. Ragnok escorted her from the office whilst Cogthorn was still caressing the journal.

It was nearing noon, and Diagon Alley was much more crowded than it had been upon Hermione's arrival.

In the event Tavaris should find out from some person or another where she had gone, she had an excuse prepared. It was too public a place; he would hear of it eventually when she kept going back, however long it took. But she would rather save the excuse for later — let him think that he had caught her out, only for her to say that if he was going to show her the first edition Shakespeare in the Nott vault then he should have expected her to go back and read it at some point.

She decided that she would look sheepish when she said it, and her tone of voice would be stubborn and defensive, as if she really had been caught out. Regardless of what she said or how she said it, though, she knew it would be better to beg forgiveness than ask permission.

Oddly, Hermione half-wished that Tavaris would find out immediately, today, so that she could lie straight to his face. She suspected she would relish the opportunity.

Nevertheless, she kept her hood up and tried not to draw too much attention to herself as she made her way up the High Street.

For the first time, she almost didn't want to visit Remus. She was too restless; she wanted to keep going, to not break stride, lest she lost momentum. But he was waiting, likely already worrying, so off she went to the flat above Jameson's pub.

Sure enough, Remus let out a sigh of relief when he saw her. As Hermione followed him upstairs and into the kitchen to put the kettle on, she tried and failed not to imagine the day that he would stop being relieved at the sight of her — the day that he would be waiting for the buzz of the intercom, worrying more and more every minute that the buzz did not come.

The day that there would be no sight of her at all.

"Now, I wasn't sure what to get, exactly, the selection was much broader than I'd expected," Remus said, looking simultaneously bashful and bewildered, "and rather a lot more specific than I would have thought possible, so I apologise if this is completely the wrong thing but …" He met her gaze with a tight-lipped smile, his face slightly pink. "Hopefully, it works."

It took Hermione a few seconds to realise what he was talking about. He was leaning back against the kitchen counter, his shoulders a tense line and becoming tenser still when she did

not immediately respond. In his hands, held as though it were a small bomb that he had been informed was disabled but that he nevertheless feared might detonate if he breathed on it too hard, was a box of tampons.

She felt her eyes widen. She thought she might have actually gasped. Never had she been so excited to see a box of tampons.

“I mean, this is what Muggles use,” said Remus awkwardly, misinterpreting her reaction, “I don’t know if it’s different in the wizarding world or —”

“Oh, it’s plain mediaeval what they do in the wizarding world — and I mean that genuinely,” said Hermione fervently, lifting the box from his hands as if it were something fragile. She gazed at it covetously. “One is quite literally *on the rag*. This is wonderful, Remus, thank you,” she added, giving him a distracted kiss on the cheek.

“I’m glad,” he said, relaxing. “I figured you should have stuff here, just in case, so you needn’t go back early if you’re caught by surprise again.”

She tore her eyes from the box to blink at him, taken aback. In all her distress, she had completely forgotten about the excuse she had given him. Evidently, it had been on his mind all week. She hoped when he had gone to the grocers, he had not bought this instead of eggs.

The kettle whistled loudly. Remus turned away to lift it from the stovetop.

“Next time,” she said, hoping there would be a next time, “use the money you got converted for me last month — there should still be some left.”

To her surprise, Remus nodded without argument.

“I felt terribly naïve when I discovered there was a tax on these sorts of products,” he said, as he poured two cups of tea, shaking his head in disbelief. “Really, you wouldn’t expect something so essential to be so expensive.”

Hermione twisted her lips to hide a smile, humming in response. She feared that if she spoke just then, she would sound far too pleased.

She went into the bathroom to stow the tampons away in the cupboard under the sink, grinning to herself as she did, and came back out to accept her cup of tea and follow him into the living area. Remus plopped down on the sofa with a *whooshing* sigh, like his body had been craving this cushioned seat.

“Before I forget,” he said abruptly, pointing to the desk, “I put your copy of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* in the top drawer. You left it here last weekend.”

Her face fell.

“Oh, yes,” she said, swallowing. “Thank you.”

Reluctantly, she set her tea down on the coffee table, went over to the desk, and pulled open the top-left drawer —

“Ah, it’s the right one, actually,” said Remus quickly.

But the drawer was already open, and Hermione found her own face smiling up at her from its depths. Nonplussed, she withdrew a thin, folded stack of worn pages removed from past issues of *The Daily Prophet*.

Remus let out a resigned sigh behind her.

“Why have you kept all these?” she asked in bewilderment, sitting down to spread the pages out on the desk. “I mean, this is from the — oh — hang on — *all* of them are from the society pages.”

She found a photograph of herself on Tavaris’ arm from the Yule Gala in ‘81. Below it, she was pictured with Sirius and Stefan McKinnon as the three of them sparked the start of a standing ovation; the tiny text of the caption read: *Lady Mione Nott (left), Sirius Black (centre), and Stefan McKinnon (right) applaud new alternative band for Muggle song.* She looked, as she had feared then, like a young trophy wife, done up sleekly and stylishly in brilliant scarlet and gold and displaying more skin than anyone else who could be made out in the background.

“Whenever you were out back then, there were always pictures of you in there from wherever you went,” said Remus, in uncomfortable explanation.

On the next saved copy, among a small cluster of photographs from the celebration of Draco’s birth, Hermione found herself again; she was holding Theodore and crouched alongside Honoria Macmillan, who held Ernie in her arms, whilst Pippa Macmillan showed Theodore and Ernie the Malfoys’ ever-blooming roses with great enthusiasm. Hermione was struck by her own smile, especially from a day that she could not remember having so very many of them.

“As I’ve said before, it was often the best way to keep track of … well …” This time, Remus did not even finish.

“I look beautiful,” said Hermione wonderingly.

“Does that surprise you?” she heard him ask softly.

In yet another copy, she and Tavaris were standing with Winifred and Barty Crouch Jr at the funeral for Evan Rosier. In one more, she was speaking to Bedelia and her mother, Ivanna Greengrass, in the gardens of Malfoy Manor whilst albino peacocks roamed in their midst. In that same spread, she was also pictured in the background of an image of Abraxas, Creighton Rosier, and Cygnus and Pollux Black, who were all posing for the camera; she was rolling her eyes behind their backs.

“It’s only … well … I hardly bother with the society pages myself,” she told Remus, without tearing her gaze from the collection of photographs.

There had been little point in the future, seeing as all she would discover in the Society Section was whether her hair really had looked good at whatever function she had most

recently attended, with whom Harry had last shaken hands, where Fleur had last shopped, and which flavours James Sirius, Albus Severus, and Lily Luna had each chosen for themselves at the reopened Florean Fortescue's Ice-Cream Parlour in Diagon Alley.

"I haven't seen most of these photographs before," said Hermione, with a slight frown. "They were well chosen …"

Too well chosen, in fact.

In many of them, Hermione had been captured in the company of a family notably neutral or else firmly on the right side of the conflict. Meanwhile, when the faces of those whose politics were most extreme cropped up, she was always pulling some sort of expression, making her disdain clear. There was even one of her throwing her hands up in frustration and storming away, paired with the caption: *Lady Mione Nott (left) and Madam Walburga Black (right) spotted having a row!*

"That clever bastard," Hermione muttered.

She turned back to Remus.

"Tavaris owns a rather sizable portion of *The Daily Prophet* — though I suspect the Order must have known that, mustn't they?"

"We did," Remus confirmed.

"For someone who mocks the Malfoys so much for their vanity, he's exceptionally talented at manipulating public image," said Hermione peevishly, as she reshuffled the collection to be put away.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted the cover of a *Witch Weekly* magazine which had been lying at the bottom of the emptied drawer. Curious, she put the stack of papers aside and reached for it.

"I remember spotting this out on the coffee table once. I wanted to ask but it didn't seem like the right moment," she said, tossing Remus an amused smile over her shoulder. "I had no idea that you were a subscriber of *Witch Weekly*."

He huffed.

"Believe me, I am not."

Smiling still, she let her eyes rove over the cover. It was taken over by a large image of Minister Bagnold, who had her arms crossed over her chest as she gave the camera a hard, challenging look. Printed across her waist was the lead article line: *Top Ten Witches in Positions of Power.* Scattered about it in smaller print were other article lines such as, *Safety in Style: How to Hide Your Wand Without Ruining Your Outfit*, *Tips on Telling Him You Disagree*, and *What Are Muggles Wearing This Winter?*

It was the most openly political issue of *Witch Weekly* that Hermione had ever come across, in the past and future both. Mind-boggled, she glanced at the top-right corner of the

magazine; the issue was dated the first week of January of ’81.

Her skin chilled.

“This is the last issue that was printed while Victoria McKinnon was editor-in-chief.”

“Lily gave it to me.”

Hermione shifted to sit sideways on the chair. She gazed at Remus with a heavy heart.

“She couldn’t stand to look at it anymore, but neither could she bear to toss it out,” he shared, smiling grimly. “She asked me to hold on to it for her.”

“I’m sorry,” said Hermione, insufficiently.

“Me, too.”

As, with tremendous care, she stowed the magazine and the collection of society pages back away in the desk, she thought of the name everyone knew — *Eamon Travers* — and the four other names that they did not — *Lachlan Travers, Carden Travers, Amycus Carrow, Alecto Carrow.* But there was a fifth name: *Peter Pettigrew*. He had visited the McKinnons earlier in the day to seal all the windows, thus ensuring no one would be able to escape through them once the fire started.

“There was meant to be more people there that night, you know,” Hermione found herself saying after a moment.

She both felt and heard the unsmooth tenor of her voice, as though it were awash with waves of vibration from the sudden return of rattling energy in her bones.

“That … *that* night?” said Remus, sounding taken aback.

She did not look at him, staring hard at the drawer.

“Mrs McKinnon’s birthday party. The Macmillans were invited — her brother, Oswald, and his family,” she said, her teeth clenched and starting to chatter slightly. “Honoria — Oswald’s wife — is the sister of Barty Crouch Sr. B—Barty Jr exposed his cousins to a serum sample contaminated with the Black Cat Flu so none of them could attend.”

At this first drip of truth from her tongue, her words came faster, pouring out of her mouth as though from a running faucet whose handle had been snapped off.

“The Diggorys, too, Honoria’s sister, Callidora Diggory, Amos Diggory, and their son, Ce— Cedric, he — he was put in hospital, he wasn’t even *three*, and Barty Jinxed him off his toy broomstick so none of them could attend. Skeeter — Rita Skeeter — a journalist, apparently Mrs McKinnon’s new protégé, she was invited as well, Bellatrix went to her flat that afternoon and told her not to attend and Skeeter *didn’t*, she kept her mouth shut, she warned *no one* —” Her voice cracked horribly, and she sucked in a large, shuddering breath.

"'It was a *party*, Mione. Plenty more people were meant to be there last night. But the Dark Lord was mindful, and their lack of threat granted them his mercy.' That is what Abraxas called it — *mercy*. Because the McKinnons, with their *outspokenness*, were the true threat — Mrs McKinnon for her publishing, Mr McKinnon and Walter for their politics, Stefan for attending a Muggle university, Aisling for mere association in defiance of the Travers family's beliefs, Marlene for her rebellion, and that f—f—four-year-old boy for God only *knows* what reason — you should have heard them laughing … The crup. 'Awful, just awful. The poor creature was probably barking and whining for help until its last, dying breath,' so caught up in their own amusement, they couldn't even remember the word *howling*."

So tightly wound were her muscles, Hermione had started to shake from it. She attempted to rein herself in, taking heaving breaths and wiping the wetness from under her eyes. Eventually, she looked back at him.

Remus had gone deathly pale.

Not all of this information was new to him; he had known what had happened to the McKinnons, and, in fact, probably knew more about how it had happened than most of the public did.

And yet, his eyes were wide and his mouth was hanging open in abject horror, because second-hand accounts were not enough.

Names were not enough.

The wizarding world needed to know the truth of what had been done, but Hermione now felt that mere truths would not do it proper justice; she wanted it to be known just how deep the savage horror of those truths went.

She wanted the wizarding world to hear Tavaris' and Abraxas' laughter as they had struggled to come up with the canine equivalent to screaming. She wanted them to hear Barty's mocking, "Say hello, Benjy," to the twelve boxes that had altogether held the dismembered remains of Benjy Fenwick; to hear the Dark Lord cite the philosophies of Niccolò Machiavelli as an excuse for ordering the murder of Gideon and Fabian Prewett; and to hear Snape call Harry an "it" as he had fallen to his knees and begged for Lily's life but not her freedom.

But to hear was not enough, either.

Hermione wanted the wizarding world to see, too, the unrepenting indignance on Peter's face as he had whinged about walking alone at the back when the pavement was not wide enough for four people. She wanted them to see the masked couple dancing merrily while a piano fallboard had been dropped on a man's head; to see the silver snakehead of Abraxas' walking-stick as a boot had swung into the bandaged stump of Moody's missing leg; and to see the body of Argo Pyrites be stepped over by more than one pair of feet.

Hermione no longer wanted all her words read out before the members of the Wizengamot; she wanted those members to see their own faces shoved back at them as their snivelling smiles stretched with pride when the Dark Lord had deigned to introduce her to them.

Roughly, Hermione wiped her eyes again. She forcibly unclenched her teeth.

“Pardon me, I had not planned on saying all that just now,” she muttered shortly. “I’m sorry, Remus. It was unfair of me to spring all that on you without warning.”

At least a minute must have passed in silence before she had resumed speaking, and Remus had not moved a single muscle. If possible, his horror had increased.

“Is that truly how the Death Eaters talked about it?” he asked, in a voice barely above a whisper. “Rather than focus on any of the rest of it, they *laughed* at Marlene’s pet crup, Raffy? *That* is your memory of the McKinnons’ massacre?” His eyebrows furrowing slightly, he added, “Is this what *all* your memories of the war are like?”

Hermione blinked.

“My memories …” she murmured to herself, her eyes widening as an idea dawned on her, “… oh, but *of course* … How did I not think of it befo—?”

“*Mione*,” Remus interrupted, sounding strained.

She shot him a distracted look.

“Hmm? Oh.” She smiled bitterly. “I will not say, ‘I told you so,’ but … well … ignorance truly is bliss, isn’t it?”

She was going to ruin that bliss for everyone.

At that moment, she had the overwhelming urge to put her cloak and boots back on and go straight back to Gringotts. It was too early, though. In all likelihood, the vault was not prepared, nor even close to it. A better plan would be to wait until tomorrow, which was not so far away, really. Two outings in a single weekend, however, would be unwise, especially whilst Tavaris was home. Two outings required two explanations, two days in a row. She feared that this would be testing her luck.

Be that as it may, seeing as she was — as she had told the goblins — on a bit of a crunch for time, she took a minute to wonder whether it would be worth it or not. If she wanted, she could make it so that Tavaris would not expect an explanation from her at all, no matter how long she was gone or in what manner she came back.

He never did ask where she went, after he went too far.

She could make him go too far again, if she wanted.

But Hermione was not yet this desperate. Therefore, she resigned herself to waiting out the week.

Although he seemed at a loss as to what had caused it, Tavaris noticed the change in her immediately.

“You seem much better today, darling,” he remarked when she returned to the sitting room after tucking Theodore into bed that night.

Hermione lifted the carafe of elderberry wine off the drink cart to refill her goblet from dinner, not looking at him.

“I suppose you could say that I’ve had an epiphany of sorts,” she said, as she poured.

“An epiphany?” Tavaris repeated inquiringly.

“A moment of sudden revelation or insight.”

“Oh, is that what an epiphany is?”

She turned, supressing a smile, and joined him on the sofa. She left a cushion of space between them.

“Well, don’t leave me in anticipation,” he said, looking amused. “Tell me of this epiphany of yours.”

“I have reached a new understanding of the fact that each of us gets only one life to live,” said Hermione. “That is, no other life is awaiting me at the conclusion of this one. This is it. Therefore, anything I want to do with my life has got to be done here and now, in this one.”

Tavaris searched her eyes silently.

“Does that make sense?” she added, suddenly worried her explanation had sounded too repetitive to be comprehensible.

He nodded his head slowly, his expression growing curiously introspective. The hand that was not holding his tumbler drifted toward her; for a split-second, she thought he was reaching out to touch her somehow, but then his hand fell to the empty cushion between them. He began tracing invisible patterns with idle fingertips.

“Is this your way of informing me that you wish to start a career?” he asked, watching the movement of his own hand.

She scoffed in disbelief.

“Of course not. Exactly how dim-witted do you think I am?” she replied. “I know you would never allow that.”

She knew that he would not bother denying this and was unsurprised when he nodded again.

“I would not put it past you to ask, nevertheless. Knowing the answer to a question hardly ever prevents you from asking it.”

She sipped her wine, sighing as she swallowed.

“That is an unfortunately astute observation,” she muttered, not particularly pleased about it.

“A desire to do what you want with your life even though your life will be and end here, with me?” said Tavaris, looking at her once more. His gaze was oddly open. “What else could you mean but a career? Not a job. Not a profession. No, darling. Even whilst being neither, you remain, at heart, half-bureaucrat and half-revolutionary.”

It was disconcerting that even without knowing whom Hermione truly was, he still somehow knew her better than most.

She considered him for a moment, eyeing his hand which rested aimlessly between them still.

With a spark of inspiration, she shifted closer wordlessly. Almost at once, Tavaris placed his hand on her knee, and he did not say a word about it, either, likely aware that she would move away again if he did.

“Perhaps a compromise can be made,” he said, sounding much less subdued than he had a second ago. “Mind you, I use that word loosely. I do not mean part-time work or anything of the sort.”

Hermione mouth fell open. She stared at him in astonishment.

“But perhaps,” he continued lightly, holding her gaze, “there are a few things that you could do to assist me with mine. You could be involved in my work in the Wizengamot, to a degree.”

She could scarcely believe what she was hearing.

This is all he really wants, she thought. *Someone beside him.*

He wanted to be heard, to be seen, and most of all, to be understood. In that moment, Hermione decided that she would be willing to make those concessions if it would get her closer to what she wanted; a worthy exchange, it would be, for he was her greatest source of information. Plus, it would be remarkably easy do it: to listen, to see, and to understand.

After all, she feared she knew him better than most, too.

“Would you like that, darling?” he asked.

She didn’t bother answering; he already knew.

A smile playing at his lips, Tavaris removed his hand from her knee to lean forward and grab a sheaf of parchment off the coffee table, which was littered with documents that he was supposed to be reading.

“Here,” he said, handing it to her. “This was introduced by Belinda Brown toward the end of Friday’s session. Tell me what you make of it.”

Hermione could practically feel her own eyes gleaming as she took it. On the cover page was the short title:

It would not pass. But Belinda Brown would revise the Bill and attempt to get it through again in 2004, following a shift in popular belief, and that time, she would succeed in achieving better regulation of the poaching and skinning of various magical creatures for profit.

With pleasure, Hermione remembered Brown calling Wymond Selwyn out in front of all his fellow seat-holders for his extensive collection of fur rugs and tapestries, going as far as to imply illegal obtainment (which was probably true, really). Wymond had resembled a pufferfish, the way he had floundered at the abrupt accusation.

"You already know what I make of this," Hermione said before she had even flipped past the cover page.

"Yes, you're terribly obvious about these things, darling. I am not actually looking for an opinion," said Tavaris unapologetically. "However, this Bill will be touched upon tomorrow night — among other things — so you may like to familiarise yourself with it in case you should want to come with me."

She shot him a questioning look.

"Lucius has found … an aspiring politician, we might call him," he began, choosing his words carefully. He wore a slight smirk. "As it stands, this wizard is by no means serving at a low-level position, but he has too much ambition to remain satisfied there for long — and he has already held this position for four years now. Over the course of the last few months, Lucius has been working on him — allowing him access to certain privileges and indulgences that would not otherwise be available to him. He has toured him about Malfoy Apothecaries and the vineyards, brought him round the Club as a guest, invited both him and his wife to join Narcissa and himself in their box at the Bard Theatre … He has not merely *shown* him but has let him *experience* first-hand what sort of lifestyle he might achieve if he were to only strive a little higher, with the right hand to help him up.

"Now Lucius aims to prove himself a tremendously *useful* friend to have by paving the way for this wizard to forge connections of his own. And it would hardly be impressive if he started with introducing him to his own father, would it?"

Although Hermione suspected she already knew, she asked who this wizard was.

"His name is Cornelius Fudge," Tavaris informed her, confirming her suspicions. "He is the junior minister in the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes. He and Lucius will be coming to Nottingham Hall tomorrow night for drinks. Would you care to join us?"

Would she care to witness first-hand the political indoctrination of future Minister for Magic Cornelius Fudge?

The answer was a resounding, "*Yes*."

Grinning, Hermione took a sip of her wine, sat back, and began to read. All the while, Tavaris savoured his firewhiskey, emitting soft, self-satisfied sounds, and twirled a lock of her hair like some sort of lovestruck fool unable to keep his hands to himself.

What a brilliant idiot, she thought, almost fondly. *He's going to rue this day.*

Even though he would not hear it from her as she had originally planned, there would still come a day in the far future that Tavaris would learn the truth; when he would look up from his book and see Harry Potter standing at his cell. And Tavaris — who was frankly the exact antithesis of an idiot — would look back on this very moment and recognise it for what it was: the beginning of the end for him and all his brethren.

Because within Hermione had ignited the familiar burning quest for knowledge, and ever so unwittingly, he had chosen this moment to open her another door, so she would not have to eavesdrop from outside in order to obtain more. If he would invite her to sit in on this meeting, on how many more conversations would he allow her to listen in?

It soothed some of her restlessness. The anxious anticipation of her return to Gringotts which she had expected to fill her whole week lessened to a low thrum of energy, for she knew that, by doing this, she was still working toward her goal.

"I understand that you possess a strong aversion to this particular vice," Tavaris said the following night, as they waited in the gentlemen's parlour on the ground floor of Nottingham Hall, "and for that aversion, I have previously made certain accommodations, but I'm afraid this is important for — ah — setting the scene, I suppose."

As Hermione watched, he unwrapped a small package of cigars and placed them neatly in a silver clawfoot tin on the side table, on which there was an ice bucket, a collection of tumblers on a tray, and several crystal decanters holding various liquors. He identified each one: Blishen's Firewhiskey, Beetle Berry Whiskey, Dragon Barrel Brandy, and Sorcerer's Smoking Scotch.

"Lucius has gotten into brandy lately, so he'll have that neat. Don't ask him; just pour it. Then ask Fudge. In singling him out this way, he will be given the hope that, someday, if he plays his cards right, no one will ask what he'd like to drink because they'll already know."

Hermione looked at him shrewdly.

"This is why you were not Sorted into Ravenclaw," she said.

Tavaris appeared to ponder it.

"Probably."

As he fixed his own drink, she let her eyes wander the room. Much to her dismay, it was the very opposite of the lady's parlour; all dark wood, leather, silver accents, and low, warm lighting. A wide, ornate fireplace was centred on one wall, the flames roaring in the hearth

Charmed cooler to avoid giving off too much heat on this early June night. Directly opposing it was a large display case that held a combination of heirlooms, items which would no doubt be hideously overpriced at Borgin and Burkes, and other antique oddities perhaps picked up on someone's travels overseas. And in the middle of the room, there was a circle of six green leather armchairs, with a small table between every pair adorned with a gas lamp, a couple of marble coasters, and a crystal ashtray.

What were they called? Cigar rooms? Smoking rooms? All synonyms, she supposed, for this so-called gentlemen's parlour.

She caught herself sneering and hastily stopped.

"What'll you have, then, darling?"

"I'll survive a brandy or two," she said. As Tavaris reached for the decanter, she added quickly, "No rocks."

There was a bitter twist to his lips.

"Oh, I know."

Once they had both sat down with their drinks, Tavaris took a long sip and wiped the abruptly grim look off his face. Smooth jazz was emitting softly from a gramophone in the corner.

"Now, do not hesitate to voice your disagreement when it undoubtedly arises," he said.

"Oh, thank you for clarifying. I do so tend to hesitate, don't I?" said Hermione, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Chuckling, he proceeded to explain.

"From what Lucius has informed me, Cornelius Fudge is already right-leaning" (*Bloody Tory,* she thought automatically.) "but he is much closer to the centre than Lucius would prefer. You, being as far left as left goes —"

"I am not totally convinced you know how far left that left can go," said Hermione.

"— will balance it out," Tavaris continued, rolling his eyes, "perhaps even send him sliding further in the opposite direction, closer to where we want him. You are, after all, a bit of an extremist, darling."

She raised both eyebrows in disbelief.

"Oh, *I* am the extremist between us, am I?"

"A poor word choice," Tavaris acquiesced. "Radical, more like."

"Correct me if I'm wrong," she said, giving him an arch look, "but were the Death Eaters not referred to as an 'unsanctioned league of radicals' in every bit of legislation produced by Crouch in the last decade?"

He reached over to pat her on the knee.

“There you go, no hesitation at all. Well done.”

Now she rolled her eyes.

Just then, there was small rapping at the door. At Tavaris’ beckoning, Goppy poked his head in to announce their two guests. Bowing his head, he stepped sideways and held the door open for Lucius, who entered the room with such a cool air of overall haughtiness that for a split-second Hermione was struck by the sudden fear that he had somehow slithered straight out of her childhood memories.

Swallowing, she put her drink down and rose to greet him.

“Lucius,” she said, in a voice of forced pleasantry, letting him clasp her hands and accepting a peck on the cheek. “I hope you don’t mind my intrusion. I was dreadfully bored so Tavaris let me tag along.”

“Your intrusions are always welcome,” said Lucius, which was surely a bold-faced lie.

Over his shoulder, she saw a younger, rather timid-looking Cornelius Fudge trail inside, dressed in the same style of pinstriped robes that he had tended to don in the future but lacking his signature green bowler cap.

“Mione, I’d like you to meet a good friend of mine, Cornelius Fudge,” said Lucius, with a smooth gesture. “Cornelius, this is Lady Mione Nott.”

Fudge appeared a little surprised to see Hermione in their midst, as though someone’s wife joining them was something he never could have predicted. Nevertheless, he smiled and offered his hand.

“How do you do, Lady Nott?”

“Well, thank you,” she said, shaking his hand. “I hear you work in the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes, is that right?”

“Junior minister,” said Fudge, with a proud nod.

“Oh, good for you. Tavaris, did you need a refresh?”

“I’m fine for now, darling.”

She turned away from Fudge to go pour Lucius his brandy.

“Cornelius, allow me to introduce Lord Tavaris Nott, an old friend of the family …”

Tavaris did not bother standing up.

Undeterred, Fudge approached to shake his hand.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lord Nott,” he said.

“There’s no need for any of that here, Fudge,” replied Tavaris dismissively, “I must insist you forgo such formalities.”

Fudge gave a short chuckle tinged with nerves.

“Of course, of course,” he muttered.

“What’ll you have to drink, Mr Fudge?” Hermione asked him, as he followed Lucius’ lead in sitting down across from Tavaris. She handed Lucius a tumbler of brandy.

“Oh — er — scotch if you have it, please, on the rocks. Thank you, Mrs Nott.”

“*Missus*,” she muttered under her breath as she turned to the side table again, wrinkling her nose.

“*Mione*,” Fudge amended, with another chuckle.

Lucius met his gaze and gave a subtle shake of his head.

Fudge’s swallow was audible.

“Ah, forgive me, Lady Nott. I jest — poorly.”

As any friend would, Lucius took the attention off his misstep by initiating a discussion of the Bill recently put out by the Head of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Hermione handed Fudge a tumbler of scotch — neat — from which sweet-smelling smoke rose, before retaking her seat, crossing her legs, and picking up her own drink with a sigh.

While Tavaris made his supremely negative opinion of Belinda Brown’s Bill known, Fudge’s eyes kept flitting between the two of them like he was doing some rapid age-calculating. She could pinpoint the moment he concluded that she must be either a trophy wife or a mistress who somehow wound up with a ring; understanding dawned clearly on his face, as though he thought he had finally just sorted out why her presence in that room was seemingly so easily accepted.

She was another of those unattainable commodities on display. With purpose, she had worn her maroon dress — “the tight one,” Tavaris had called it when suggesting (ordering) how she ought to dress tonight.

To be perfectly honest, Hermione was just grateful to have gotten her own chair this time.

“… Mione disagrees, of course —”

“Oh, I don’t even have to voice it myself now?” she said, glancing sideways at Tavaris.

“I thought I’d save you the trouble of hesitating.”

“How incredibly thoughtful of you.”

“I am known to be,” said Tavaris, with feigned solemnity.

“You are *known* to be full of — oh, goodness me,” she gasped mockingly, “I ought to watch my language in front of company.”

Lucius snorted.

“Tavaris and Mione tend not to agree where politics are concerned,” he explained to Fudge, before looking at Hermione and proceeding to speak with unbearably characteristic condescension. “Dragon hide has many more uses than the merely superficial, you do realise this, don’t you? Protective gloves, for example, which must be worn for the tending of certain magical plants and the brewing of —”

“Certain potions, yes,” she finished curtly, cutting him off. “Dragon-hide gloves are also used for Quidditch. This does not mean that the use of dragon hide should not be more heavily regulated. It’s not *silk*, Lucius — it’s not some fabric for dressmaking. It is the skin of living, breathing, thinking, and feeling creatures. Brown’s Bill concerns the rights of those creatures — you do realise this, don’t you?”

“What rights?” said Lucius, pulling a face.

Hermione drew a very large, very indignant breath —

“What say you, Fudge?” interjected Tavaris, before she could get started.

Fudge shifted his weight.

And, really, it was an abhorrently clever tactic. How could Fudge’s fragile masculinity possibly withstand agreeing with the only woman in a room of men who intimated him?

“I *believe*,” he started tentatively, “if Brown were to be given the leeway to impose stricter laws on not only the obtainment but the integral *uses* of the hides and furs of magical creatures, the members of the British wizarding community would all too quickly find themselves insufficiently protected from minor bodily harms we have long since learned how to avoid.”

Tavaris regarded him appraisingly.

“A highly diplomatic answer,” he remarked.

“Indeed,” said Lucius, pleased. “Well said, Cornelius.”

Hermione shrugged jerkily.

“You’d have to simplify your highly diplomatic, well-said answers if you ever seek to grasp the attention of the public as a whole,” she said. “Not everyone listening is as educated as yourself.”

Lucius wore an expression of amused scepticism.

“Do the uneducated even *follow* politics?” he drawled.

She stared at him in horrified amazement.

“‘Simplify,’” muttered Tavaris, chuckling into his tumbler. “What a tactful way of saying, ‘Dumb it down.’”

Tactful, she repeated in her head, unimpressed. *Not diplomatic.*

For the next fifteen minutes, she listened to Tavaris, Lucius, and Fudge all delve into the supposedly unfavourable intricacies of Brown’s Bill and discuss, also unfavourably, the seat-holders who were most likely to vote in favour of it. Eventually, it shifted to the latter two listening to Tavaris joke about Wymond Selwyn’s propensity for needless filibustering.

“Needless in appearance, that is,” he said, with an amused smirk. To Hermione, he added, “Would you fetch the cigars, darling?”

“Yes …” said Lucius cautiously, as she stood from her chair. He turned his head slightly to look at Fudge. “I have heard rumour that Selwyn is known for … helping friends in need, should they only come to him with the right amount …”

It was lucky that Fudge currently had his back to her, because at this, Hermione’s mouth dropped open in shock.

“Of course, as far as I am aware, it *is* only a rumour,” Lucius continued smoothly, leaning back and lifting his drink to his lips. “Likely the product of people attempting to find an explanation for his behaviour. Selwyn surely has his own reasons for his stalling of the seemingly random and mundane.”

“He’s exceptionally good at it. You should hear the way he drones on — one might mistake him for Professor Binns,” said Tavaris, drawing a genuine laugh from Fudge. “And it drives several seat-holders positively mad each time it happens, though none more so than Griselda Marchbanks. Geoffrey — Mulciber, that is — brings a magazine or two with him to each session just in case. Ah, that reminds me,” he added, looking up at Hermione as she returned with the tin of cigars, “Geoffrey has asked himself round for dinner this Saturday.”

“Has he, now?” she said distractedly.

“I’ve no idea the reason but, Lucius, your parents will be joining us, and he said to set the table for six so it would seem he will not be coming alone.”

“Awfully forward of him.”

“His dining room is under refurbishment, apparently.” Tavaris appeared bemused. “I don’t believe his estate has undergone refurbishment since the plumbing was installed.”

Hermione was barely listening anymore. As she proffered the tin so Lucius and Fudge could each select a cigar for himself, her mind was fixed firmly on what had just been alluded to.

The question was on the tip of her tongue, and she waited as patiently as she could to ask it, not protesting the heavy smoke that steadily filled the enclosed space even when her lungs began to strain from the effort it took to breathe through it. Near midnight, when Lucius and Fudge finally took their leave and she and Tavaris were left alone in the manmade fog, she turned to him and asked without preamble, "Does Wymond Selwyn truly accept bribes to filibuster?"

Another puff of smoke issued from his mouth. After seven drinks, Tavaris seemed quite foggy himself.

"It's my favourite thing about him, you know," he said thickly, holding his cigar aloft. "He has a spectacular gift for saying anything and everything for hours on end whilst simultaneously saying nothing at all. Sometimes, when we're discussing items of an especially dull nature, I pay him an hour just to see everyone grow tense with fear that it will last the whole afternoon."

"Of course, you do," said Hermione, rolling her eyes.

"The expression of polite exasperation on Dumbledore's face is well worth the fifty Galleons that Selwyn charges for every hour."

She huffed and let her smile show, as if it were a product of no more than amused incredulity. This was the confirmation she had been after; testimony unknowingly given to the Minister for Magic that Wymond Selwyn — a member of the Wizengamot who even in the future was known for his seemingly unprompted filibustering — took bribes.

It seemed she would be finding plenty more dirt on this lot than that which pertained to their Death Eater activity.

*

At long last, Saturday arrived. Mid-morning, Hermione returned to Diagon Alley with a revised version of her original plan in mind. She stopped at Scribbulus Writing Instruments to purchase a Self-Inking Quill, a scroll of parchment, and a package of paper labels for eleven Sickles and two Knuts, then popped into Potage's Cauldron Shop for two sets of a dozen glass phials and several spindly metal stands to go with them, which totalled at eight Sickles and eight Knuts.

This left precisely one Sickle and no Knuts in her coin pouch, and it was only the second day of June; her monthly allowance had just been replenished the day before. Fifty Galleons remained, however, and she comforted herself with the knowledge that those could easily be exchanged for Sickles or Knuts.

With her paper packages tucked securely under her arm, she pulled her hood up and headed toward Gringotts Bank.

The second Hermione stepped foot in its splendorous marble hall, the cone-shaped head of every goblin posted along the long counters turned toward her. Although it lasted no longer

than that single second, and after, they all returned to their work as though nothing had happened, it was obvious; every goblin at Gringotts had by now learned whom she was.

Oh, of course, she thought, with a jolt of surprise. *They've always known.*

This was the true reason their eyes had followed her every time she had visited the bank in the future, not out of any lingering bitterness or distrust for her regrettably necessary robbing of it; they had been watching her in anticipation.

Marvelling, Hermione approached the first available bank teller, who happened to be Bogrod.

One could never be certain what lurked in the depths of a goblin's eyes, black as they were, but Bogrod's positively gleamed when she greeted him.

"Good day, ma'am," he said silkily. He accepted her wand for inspection, though it was unclear whether he was genuinely looking at it or not. He handed it back, and with a gesture down the counter, he added, "Ragnok will escort you to your vault."

"Thank you, sir."

She turned and made her way over to Ragnok, who then led her into the passageway where Head Goblin Cogthorn stood waiting with his fingers interlocked in front of him.

That was quick, she thought. Someone must have alerted him to her presence.

Ragnok summoned a cart with a sharp whistle.

"A vault has been prepared as promised, Minister," Cogthorn informed Hermione with a sly look, as the cart came hurtling out the tunnel toward them.

"Excellent," she said heartily. "Thank you."

He helped her into the back of the cart, then joined her while Ragnok climbed in. Without wasting another second, the cart shot off at full speed down the track.

"I see you have managed to scrounge up some more material," Cogthorn said conversationally after a few minutes, shooting a glance at the packages on her lap.

"About that," she said, gripping the rim of the cart tightly with one hand. "It turns out I already have a lot of the material I need for this. What I really needed was —" she paused as they tipped temporarily sideways, zipping round a sloping corner, "— a more sufficient method of presenting it."

"Is that so?"

He was reclining with one ankle crossed over his knee and his arms spread as wide as they went along the back of the cart. She had never seen anyone look so comfortable in one of these rickety, *clunking*, racing, likely health-and-safety-violating contraptions.

The cart gained air for one heart-plummeting second, then abruptly dipped downward to avoid a jet of white-hot flames shooting overhead.

“Yes,” said Hermione, in a high-pitched voice. “We’re going to need shelves — lots of them.”

The cart jolted to a rattling stop, and her breath rushed out of her in a gust. She brushed her hair back out of her face and clutched her chest as her heart returned to her ribcage.

Cogthorn bared his teeth in a grin.

A minute later, he was leading the way down a short stone passage lit by torches. On the left, they passed an iron door with the rusting bronze number *713* over top of it — the very vault in which the Philosopher’s Stone would be stored in 1991.

Hermione stopped in her tracks.

“Oh, my goodness,” she huffed, half-stunned and half-amused. “It’s Vault Seven-Hundred-and-Twelve, isn’t it?”

Both Cogthorn and Ragnok stopped short. In eerily perfect sync, they wheeled round to stare at her.

“What gave you that idea?” asked Cogthorn evasively.

“There was a rumour that it was some sort of unsanctioned goblin lounge,” said Hermione, smiling in astonishment. “There were constantly goblins coming in and out of it but the vault didn’t seem to belong to anyone.”

“Wizards,” Ragnok grumbled under his breath, “always sticking their noses in goblin business.”

Cogthorn harrumphed.

“As it was even in the time of King Ragnuk the First.”

“At least then we could bite them off,” said Ragnok.

“This is true,” nodded Cogthorn, and he sighed wistfully to himself. “Alas.”

He faced forward again.

“Vault Seven-Hundred-and-Twelve is down here, Minister.”

Outwardly, it was identical to Vault 713. Cogthorn laid the whole palm of his left hand on the door; several sharp *clicks* sounded in quick succession, and the door swung open.

The passage was suddenly filled with jazz music.

“Merlin’s beard,” said Hermione, dumbstruck. “It’s actually a lounge.”

“I assure you, Minister, it is no such thing,” said Ragnok, gravely serious, before ushering her inside after Cogthorn.

He yanked the door shut quickly behind them.

The low-lit interior of the cavernous vault buzzed mutedly with indistinguishable conversation. Crushed velvet sofas and fur rugs were squeezed impossibly between massive stalagmites, gleaming silver drink trays and golden candelabras rested on flat-topped rocks, the longest of which appeared to serve as a bar, and between stalactites from the unshapen ceiling hung quite possibly the biggest disco ball she had ever seen.

For a long minute, her jaw stayed firmly unattached.

“A *lounge*,” Ragnok sneered. “Ridiculous.”

Alone at the centre of the vault, the white-haired goblin called Odbert was swaying slowly to the music with a sloshing silver goblet.

“This way, Minister,” said Cogthorn nonchalantly.

It took a few seconds for Hermione to start moving again, and then she was following him across what could have only been the dancefloor, Ragnok in tow.

A pair of goblins in pinstriped suits watched the group pass avidly from one of the sofas. Ragnok said something to them in Gobbledegook.

On the other side of the room was the entrance to another, narrower passage. Cogthorn rounded a corner, startling a young goblin who was stepping out a doorway on the left and struggling with the buttons of his trousers. The goblin backed hastily into the wall to let them pass, his eyes widening at Hermione.

At the very end of the passage, Cogthorn halted. In front of them was the door to a second vault, this one with the number *712½* above it. He opened it the same way he had the first.

Inside was, thankfully, an actual vault — albeit a very dark, mostly empty one.

Already, there were shelves lining the back wall, laden solely with dust. An old oak table and a few broken chairs were piled up in one corner, their legs all clung to by cobwebs. On a smaller table in the middle of the vault rested a single lit gas lamp and her journal.

“It’s — it’s perfect,” said Hermione, still recovering from her shock. “Thank you for pulling this together so quickly.”

Cogthorn inclined his head. He waved to the room at large, which she took to mean, “Have at it.”

Drawing a deep breath, Hermione stepped further inside, trying to decide what she wanted to do. She stared at the chairs for a beat, then firmed her jaw and took out her wand.

Repairo.

Thrice more, she repeated the thought in determination; one by one, the chairs all repaired themselves. With another wave of her wand, she unstacked them and sent them skidding across the stone floor to line neatly against the wall.

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. As she raised her wand again, she recalled Remus' words, and each time she cast, she repeated them in her head like a mantra.

"You've cast spells before, and nothing bad has happened. Nothing bad will happen this time."

Turning slowly on the spot, she cleared away the cobwebs, rid the shelves of their dust, and repaired the rest of the broken and splintered furniture. With an image in mind, she replaced the small table with the bigger one and brought one of the chairs over so it could be used as a desk. On it, she placed the gas lamp and her journal both, before finally lowering her wand with a shaky sigh.

"OK," she said to herself, and she nodded resolutely. "OK."

She approached the makeshift desk, sat down, and started unwrapping her purchases under Cogthorn's watchful gaze.

On one of the newly repaired chairs, Ragnok began to file his nails with his teeth.

"What exactly is this new method of presentation you mentioned?" Cogthorn asked, after a short while, as she set up the phials on their stands.

"Each of these phials are going to hold memories of a different crime or person of interest," Hermione explained, pointing to the phials on the table, "which Harry will later be able to retrieve and view himself using a pensieve — a magical artefact which allows one to rewatch their memories as a spectator, recreating every detail of a moment exactly as it happened, as if it were actively taking place."

Cogthorn hummed roughly in understanding.

"And why must it be Mr Harry Potter?" he asked. "What is his role in this?"

"He's my best friend," she admitted, smiling sadly. "Not to mention my brother-in-law."

It felt good to finally say it, like a weight had been lifted off her chest. A part of Hermione suddenly wished to shout, "Do you get it now? Do you realise your mistake? That's my best friend you were talking about!" But it was not Cogthorn at whom she wished to shout this, of course.

She pursed her lips.

"But he's also Harry Potter," she continued guiltily, "and in the future, Harry Potter happens to be the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

"Interesting," remarked Cogthorn, looking at her curiously.

Hermione broke his gaze.

“Now,” she said briskly, eager to move on, “this next part takes a great deal of concentration so —”

“Of course.”

He backed up to allow her space, though he did not go far.

Holding one of the phials at the ready, Hermione picked up her wand and aimed its tip at her temple. She then closed her eyes, breathing deeply, and visualised the memories she wanted as clearly and concisely as she could.

Soon, their feelings swarmed her, filling the very air she currently breathed — thick with fear, clotted with rage, drowned by despair — followed by their sounds, at first foggily, and then as loud as if someone were speaking directly into her ear.

“No one you would know. Just another insignificant Muggle the Dark Lord brought to me when he requested to see how the curse was executed.”

*“*Insignificant*?”*

“Well, I can hardly imagine anyone with a name like Billy Stubbs *could ever be important.”*

Her fingernails bit into her palm.

“HE WAS A HUMAN BEING! MAGICAL OR NOT, NO HUMAN LIFE IS WITHOUT SIGNIFICANCE, YOU HEARTLESS BASTARD*!”*

With haste, she brought forth a new, connecting memory, before Tavaris could do more than rise from his desk with his wand well in hand.

“Wormtail is to take that off your hands later this month, so you need not fear the risk of overcrowding. It shall make for an exceptional birthday gift; Cecile Dearborn so loves to tend to her plants, especially now that they are her only company.”

Lastly, she focused on the page of a journal, squeezing her eyes shut tighter until she could make out the words.

Counter-curse: Vasa Humana Vita.

Once she had it, she began to draw her wand away carefully, taking the memories along with it. She opened her eyes, and even more carefully, tipped the silver stream into the waiting phial. She stoppered it, set it on a stand, and attached one of the paper labels, on which she wrote finely, *The Disappearances of Billy Stubbs and Caradoc Dearborn.*

She sat back, out of breath. Her skin sizzled with the same mingled rage and horror she had felt then, when she had felt it first.

This was going to be a very long process.

*

Night was falling by the time Hermione left the bank. It was cooler now, as she made her way up the street toward the Leaky Cauldron, but no part of her was chilled. Currently, she was running quite hot.

She wrenched open the pub door with more force than was strictly necessary; the door *BANGED* into the wall loud enough to startle Tom at the bar.

"Pardon me," she muttered, without slowing.

With jerky movements, she got her pouch of Floo powder out, ducked into the fireplace, and dropped a pinch in the grate.

"The Nott Estate."

In a whirl of vivid green flames, she spun away, and within a few seconds, she was stepping out into the Nott Estate's sitting room and hurling the pouch of Floo powder over Abraxas' pale head at Tavaris reclining on the far sofa; it hit him squarely in the chest.

He let out a little *oomph* and looked up in surprise.

Without pause, Hermione chucked her wand at him, too. He just barely managed to catch it before it hit him in the face.

"*What the fuck*?"

"Someone's displeased," Abraxas teased.

Unthinking, only feeling, she backhanded him across the back of the head.

"*Agh*!"

Tavaris struggled up from the sofa, instantly enraged.

"Mione —"

"*What*?" she spat, fuming, as he made his approach. "Do you take issue with my tone?"

Tavaris' eyebrows had risen very high.

"I take *issue* with the fact that you have —"

"Do you know what *I* take issue with?" said Hermione vindictively before he could finish. "I have a whole list, you know, I'd be happy to share it with you if you'd like, but of course, it might take a while — it's rather extensive."

He began rounding the sofa that Abraxas still sat on to reach her, the anger in his expression only building; she moved in the opposite direction, keeping the sofa between them.

"Have you gone mad?" Tavaris demanded.

“No, I was driven there,” she retorted.

“So earlier when I said Evangeline had gone mad over Rohesia Selwyn being voted the new Chair of the Ladies’ Tea Society instead of her,” grimaced Abraxas, rubbing the back of his head, “I was obviously exaggerating.”

Neither Hermione nor Tavaris spared him a glance.

“Did you come back here tonight with the sole intention of starting a fight?”

“As a matter of fact, I did!” she declared impulsively. “After all, it’s only fair that I should get to start *some* of them myself!”

“Have you been drinking?” he asked disbelievingly.

“Oh, that’s rich coming from *you*!”

“Should I leave?” Abraxas asked no one in particular. “I should probably leave.”

He did not move.

Tavaris attempted to round the sofa again, only to have Hermione go the other way; he stepped right, and she stepped left. He stopped to glare at her, holding onto the end of the sofa for support. She wondered if he was about to draw his wand.

“Are you *absolutely* certain that fighting me right now is in your best interest?” he said, in a low, threatening voice.

“And here I was thinking you understood that my own best interest would never prevent me from telling you what I think,” said Hermione, scoffing. “Fighting you has never been in my best interest.”

“It seems you haven’t completely lost it, then, if you’ve retained the ability to at least recognise that.”

“And yet how many times have we fought, Tavaris?”

“Ah, I spoke to soon,” he mocked, “you’ve gone back —”

“Do you even know?” she asked curiously.

“— to forming *senseless*, *repetitive* arguments —”

“I certainly don’t.”

“— with no foreseeable goal beyond —”

“So how could you possibly think anything you say —”

“— making a nuisance out of us both!”

“— would deter me from —?”

“Theodore!” Abraxas interjected loudly.

Hermione stopped short.

“Well, there you have it, darling,” said Tavaris derisively, gesturing to him, but then he caught sight of Abraxas’ gaze and his hand dropped to his side. Clenching his jaw, he turned.

Theodore stood white-faced at the threshold of the room, his eyes darting back and forth between them.

“I’m going to dress for dinner,” Hermione announced abruptly, and without another word, she crossed the room, swung Theodore up into her arms without breaking stride, and went upstairs to change.

Thankfully, Tavaris did not follow.

Seeing as they would be having guests over, Theodore was served his supper early. Once Hermione had finished donning an evening gown and fixing her hair and makeup, she went into the nursery to tuck him into bed. By the wary way in which he looked at her, she wondered if it was obvious that every bone in her body was presently quaking with fury.

Perhaps it was not this, though. Perhaps he was just worried now, after witnessing her and Tavaris’ row, but he had been worried then and he would be worried again, and there was only so much she could do about that.

“I’m sorry if we frightened you, my love,” she said, taking his hand and giving it what she hoped was a comforting squeeze. “I was very angry, and I took my anger out on Pa, which is something we must never, ever do, right?”

“Never, ever,” Theodore agreed, squeezing back.

Abraxas was gone by the time she returned downstairs, having taken the Floo back to Malfoy Manor to fetch Evangeline. Tavaris gave her a dark, narrow look when she re-entered the sitting room, sat alone in his dress robes on the sofa, but said nothing as she poured herself a goblet of elderberry wine.

Soon, there was an arrival at the front doors. She sat down beside him and, contrarily, did not move.

He scoffed under his breath.

Eventually, they heard Goppy answer the knock; he directed Geoffrey and whomever he had seen fit to bring with him to the sitting room. At the sound of their approach, Tavaris put his tumbler of firewhiskey down — quite forcefully — and stood with his walking-stick. Reluctantly, Hermione joined him on her feet just as Geoffrey appeared at the threshold of the room, accompanied by a witch whom she had never met before.

Tavaris glanced between the pair, taken aback to a degree that was incredibly offensive to let show on one's face.

"I take it *this* is the reason for your spontaneous desire for a dinner party?" he said, raising an eyebrow.

Geoffrey lifted his chin.

"That it is," he said, with a grin that was simultaneously sour and self-important.

The witch on his arm appeared to be in her late-thirties, at most. She had hair like black silk, draped in a large, swooping curl over one collarbone bared by the low-cut bodice of her sculpting, lapis gown. Her every feature gave the impression of having been lifted, the outer corners of her pale eyes a high slant emphasised by an elongating, coal edge, and her rich, warm skin possessed an almost otherworldly glow.

She was quite possibly the most beguiling woman Hermione had ever encountered, save Fleur.

"Allow me to introduce my fiancée," Geoffrey said, with no shortage of smugness, "the beautiful Madam Inanna Zabini."

Hermione could not help it; she burst out laughing.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you're smiling as evilly as I am right now.

The family of goblins living near Nottingham killed in the first war are mentioned by Arthur Weasley in the books. For some of the goblins in this, I've made up their names, but most of them are cannon.

"Inanna" Zabini — named for Inanna (or Ishtar), who was a goddess of love, war, fertility, and sex, and whose many lovers tended to suffer grim fates. To this day, she confuses scholars by being such a contradiction — embodying both sex and violence, beauty and terror, fertility and death.

Rousing Recollection

Chapter Summary

> I undress in seven steps
> Like your camera's watching me
> I suppose I'll strike a pose
> But that's so predictable
> I undress in seven steps
> Because we can't stop our
> Picturing love, picturing love, picturing love
> — Picturing Love, July Talk

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hermione was doubled over with laughter, clinging to Tavaris' sleeve for support whilst he stood rigidly beside her in what was likely shocked silence.

A throat was cleared.

"Inanna, this is my good friend, Lord Tavaris Nott," Geoffrey said, sounding rather discomfited, probably on account of the abrupt onslaught of laughter in his face. "And his wife … Lady Mione Nott."

She swayed sideways into Tavaris with a fresh peal of giggles.

"How do you do, Lord Nott?" Madam Inanna Zabini greeted, unperturbed. She spoke in a luxuriously low, syrupy voice.

"Well, thank you," Tavaris replied flatly. "And yourself?"

"Oh, my goodness," Hermione gasped. She straightened up, wiping away tears of mirth. "Pardon me, that was terribly rude."

She let go of Tavaris' sleeve to approach Madam Zabini and clasp both her hands, beaming brightly.

"A true pleasure to make your acquaintance, Madam Zabini," she said honestly, as they exchanged light kisses on the cheek. "Please, call me Mione."

Madam Zabini smiled prettily.

"How do you do, Mione?"

“I’m quite splendid, thank you,” said Hermione, her cheeks aching from laughing so much. She squeezed her hands once before releasing them. “Let us get you something to drink. I’ve just poured myself some elderberry wine if that interests you.”

“Wine would be wonderful. Geoffrey, darling,” Madam Zabini said, glancing up at him with suddenly wide eyes, “what can I get you?”

“Don’t trouble yourself. Mione knows how I take it.”

Hermione smothered another giggle, barely. She grabbed the decanter of Ogden’s Old Firewhiskey off the drink cart, poured him a few fingers, and, regretfully, forgot the ice. She then poured a goblet of wine for Madam Zabini, as Tavaris invited the pair to take a seat.

“Forgive my surprise,” he said, lowering himself onto the sofa opposite them. He rested his walking-stick against the rolling, grey linen arm. “This is merely … not what I would have expected from my Saturday evening.”

Geoffrey accepted his drink with a distracted nod, then, realising it had been made neat, shot Hermione a reproachful look.

“How did you two meet?” she asked pleasantly.

“Yes,” said Tavaris, in a deceitfully airy voice, “I think I’d like to know that as well.”

Hermione picked up her own wine and sat back beside him, sipping to hide her smirk.

“We were both at a house party hosted at the Lestranges’ summer home,” Geoffrey started, and at least he had the wherewithal to recognise Tavaris’ insincerity, because his tone was defiant.

“A whole weekend of unerring delights,” Madam Zabini put in, with a mysterious smile, “spent in the most pleasurable of company …”

There was no way. There couldn’t have been. She could not possibly be alluding to some sort of weekend-long sex party, could she?

“It sounds like quite the experience,” said Hermione, in hysterical delight.

She ignored Tavaris’ sidelong look.

“It very much was.”

“We were seated opposite each other at dinner the first night,” Madam Zabini told her. “His rather macabre wit sparked my interest, I must admit, and later … Well, let us just say that I found his generosity even more appealing.”

She tossed Geoffrey a salacious wink, inciting a low chuckle. He had a hand high on her thigh, gripping rather than resting.

Oh, my God, thought Hermione, stunned. *It was totally a sex party.*

“This was in April,” Geoffrey said, holding his head a little higher. “I believe you were in Africa at the time, Tavaris — some business about a rainbow’s worth of coloured feathers, if I recall.”

Tavaris’ jaw tightened.

“Fwooper feathers.”

Geoffrey grunted.

“Yes, those,” he muttered curtly.

“Suffice it to say, it was a weekend to remember.” Madam Zabini sighed reminiscently, dragging her long, painted nails leisurely through the thick hair at the nape of his neck. “And we have spent nearly every waking moment together since.”

She met Tavaris’ gaze.

“You are so fortunate to have a friend like him.”

Geoffrey practically glowed with self-righteousness.

Fifteen minutes later, the four of them were joined by Abraxas and Evangeline, who each in an instant formed their own opinions on Geoffrey’s betrothal, neither of them positive.

“She is rather … exotic-looking,” Evangeline whispered gingerly to Hermione, as the group moved to the formal dining room.

“*Exotic-looking*?” Hermione whispered back, glancing sideways at her in disbelief. “Evangeline, be serious — she’s Italian.”

Evangeline sniffed haughtily.

“It shows.”

Over a first course of grilled peaches and burrata, Madam Zabini retold the wildly suggestive story of her and Geoffrey’s supposedly unpremeditated first encounter. The whole time, Abraxas stared at the pair in vague incredulity.

“And what, may I ask, lead you to the decision to marry?” he inquired eventually.

Geoffrey swallowed his bite, then opened his mouth —

“Do correct me if I have been provided with false information, Madam Zabini,” Abraxas continued, without waiting for an answer, “but I’d heard that you have *already* been married twice before, and neither of those marriages ended favourably.”

Madam Zabini sighed, looking unsurprised.

“It is true that I have not had the best luck in my previous marriages,” she said, in a voice laden with regret. “In fact, I have had what I can only assume is the very worst. My friends have begun to call me cursed. Sometimes, I even fear they are correct.”

Her whole demeanour softened.

“But I have a son … Blaise.”

One of Evangeline’s eyebrows rose minutely.

“How old?” she asked.

“He will be four this August.”

“So that would make him the offspring of your … second husband, is that right?”

“That’s right,” said Madam Zabini.

Evangeline smiled thinly.

“Lovely.”

“Every day, I mourn the loss of my late husbands,” Madam Zabini carried on, looking at them all solemnly, “but it is *constantly* that I mourn the fact that my son will grow up without a father. He needs a male figure in his life; someone to guide him, to set an example … Frankly, my son needs a father, and as fate would have it, Geoffrey needs a son.”

“Fate,” repeated Hermione, in amusement.

A warning came by way of her toes being crushed beneath the table.

“I mean, my own son, Theodore, happens to be the same age,” she hastened to explain. “As is Abraxas and Evangeline’s grandson, Draco. Perhaps we can arrange for the three of them to get together. I would be happy to host.”

“That’s a very kind offer,” said Madam Zabini warmly, and once again, she turned to Geoffrey with wide eyes. “What say you, darling? You must know these boys. Do you suppose Blaise would get on with them?”

Both Tavaris and Abraxas were watching him with narrowed eyes and the same rigid expression. But Geoffrey did not take his eyes off her long enough to notice.

“They are often likened to their grandfathers at their age — or father, as the case may be.”

Tavaris made a derisive noise that Geoffrey ignored.

“At the very least, Blaise would be entertained by their antics,” he said, as Abraxas’ hand clenched round his knife. “And he could do with a few friends his age. He spends too much time with just Daniella.”

“I suppose he does, doesn’t he?” murmured Madam Zabini thoughtfully. She looked back at the rest of them. “Daniella is a dear old friend of mine who often minds Blaise for me. Auntie Dee, he calls her,” she added, with a fond smile.

“Oh, isn’t that just precious?” said Hermione brightly, loving every second of this.

Madam Zabini’s smile widened.

“The answer is yes, then,” she said. “I would love it if you were to arrange something, Mione.”

Evangeline looked as though she had just bitten into a lemon.

Over the next hour or so, Madam Zabini was interrogated on everything from preparations for the upcoming wedding to her son’s education to her presence at the Lestranges’ house party, with thinly-veiled implications regarding (hypocritically) poor-parenting and supposedly deviant behaviour. Meanwhile, Geoffrey continued to comport himself with an air of superior defiance; Evangeline pursed her lips with distaste after her every bite; and Abraxas frequently made eye-contact with Tavaris, who had begun drinking heavily.

For the first time whilst gathered round this particular dinner table, Hermione enjoyed a more delicious meal than anyone else. As Goppy at last cleared away the dessert plates, she leaned back in her chair with her wine, entirely sated and entirely alone in this feeling.

Tavaris was the first to rise. He cleared his throat and gave one of his pockets a meaningful pat; Abraxas and Geoffrey stood with him, the former with profound relief and the latter with stiffly-shouldered apprehension.

“Tavaris does not allow smoking in the house,” Evangeline explained to a bemused Madam Zabini, as the three men stalked out of the room. “Mione has a sensitive nose, you see.”

“Also, smoking kills,” added Hermione, with a twinge of guilt.

It was quiet for a while; a lengthening lull in conversation, now that none of them were expected to carry it so that grown men could go on glaring at each other in relative silence. Every several seconds, Evangeline let out a purposeful sigh of impatience. Madam Zabini started sending her slanted glances over the brim of her goblet. Finally, Hermione took the initiative to begin comparing schedules to find a time for Theodore and Draco to meet Blaise. They had nearly settled on a Sunday afternoon two weeks from now when Geoffrey stormed back in, huffing and grunting with rage.

“We’re leaving,” he said shortly, grabbing Madam Zabini’s arm and pulling her up from her chair.

“Of course,” she said instantly, gazing up at him with an expression of utmost concern. “Has something happened, darling?”

“What happened is I was just cornered by the two most opinionated people I know —” his eyes flitted to Hermione briefly, “— present company excluded — and I’ve decided they can

bloody well fuck off. I've had more than enough of their condescension for one evening."

As he steered her out, Madam Zabini could be heard reassuring him in soft tones that they did not deserve him, anyway. An unnecessarily aggressive *SLAM* marked their exit out the front doors.

Hermione had never seen Evangeline look so scandalised.

"My word!" she gasped. "*Storming out of a dinner party*? How utterly *uncouth*!"

Just then, Tavaris and Abraxas could be heard returning from the back of the house; their frustrated expletives carried down the hall, reaching the formal dining room almost an entire minute before they did themselves.

Abraxas stopped short at the threshold.

"Has he truly just grabbed her and left?" he asked incredulously.

Evangeline's harrumph was answer enough.

"For fuck's sake!" exclaimed Tavaris, tossing a hand up in disbelief. "He's too smart for this!"

"Is he?" said Hermione dubiously.

Tavaris turned to her.

"He is," he said, with surprising sincerity. "He's merely so often surrounded by those who are significantly smarter than him that one would not typically pick up on it."

Oh, that's clever, she thought, understanding dawning on her. *It's feelings of inadequacy she's playing on.*

The least intelligent of his friends, and belittled because of it, if not by them directly than in the constructs of his own psyche. And Madam Zabini knew it. With her affection through both speech and touch, with her wide-eyed gaze as she dipped her head down to peer up at his own, she made Geoffrey feel — pause to supress a gag — like a man.

"What has intelligence got to do with this?" asked Evangeline, looking half-befuddled and half-disdainful. "It is not as though Geoffrey is thinking with his brain. His *brain* would not have him chasing after that trollop, never mind putting a *ring* on her finger."

Abraxas let out a mirthless snort and reached for the carafe of wine on the table.

"Trollop?" repeated Tavaris, blinking, as Abraxas refilled his goblet. "Oh, no, I'm afraid she's much more than that. Try *black widow*."

Evangeline stared at him blankly for a few seconds, then sighed and shook her head.

"You always believe the worst of people, Tavaris."

“That witch has had *two* husbands — two *wealthy* husbands — who have since died and left everything to her,” he said heatedly. “Forgive me, Evangeline, if I have some difficulty accepting that as mere coincidence!”

“And if it were *three* dead husbands, as would I,” said Evangeline clearly. “It is as they say: once is chance, twice is coincidence, but *thrice* is a pattern. This has not happened thrice.”

“It may very well be about to!” snapped Tavaris.

“Do not pretend to know about the matter of which you speak,” Abraxas told Evangeline, in a cold, even voice. “This could have been a coincidence, certainly, but it is not. Scorned by misfortune as she presents herself to be, there is no reason she should be so eager to remarry unless it is to obtain more than what she already has.”

“And she has gold,” said Tavaris.

“She has *property*,” added Abraxas.

“She has an *heir*.”

“Where does that leave her, Evangeline? Hmm? What is she missing?”

Evangeline pursed her lips and did not answer. But she knew what Madam Zabini had still to obtain; they all did.

Title.

“Your judgment is clouded by what happened to Edmund,” Evangeline told them both grimly. “Really, you two, not every wife seeks to murder her own husband. Merlin, the thought!” She shook her head in disbelief and, clearly looking for support, added to Hermione, “Can you honestly imagine?”

Hermione imagined that she was asking the wrong wife.

And apparently Tavaris thought her audacious enough to say this aloud because he shot her a warning look before she could speak.

“No, Evangeline,” she replied belatedly. “I cannot honestly imagine it at all.”

“Yes, see, Mione agrees,” said Evangeline, as though she thought this proved her point. “I say, she must be considered the authority on this. After all, she does have motive, and a much more legitimate one, at that. *Killing* for *money*? What a lowlife pursuit.”

All three of them stared at her.

“What?” she said, arching one thin eyebrow. “It is only us here. Or had we all forgotten that Geoffrey and Elias kidnapped a schoolgirl?”

Hermione’s jaw dropped.

"*Motive*," said Evangeline significantly, plucking her goblet from the table. "That is all."

Abraxas raised his own goblet, shooting Hermione a calculating look over the rim; without breaking her gaze, he drank deeply.

"*That* … is irrelevant," said Tavaris, appearing to grit his teeth.

Something about his tone made Hermione straighten her posture, suddenly poised to push her chair back and stand if need be.

Evangeline appeared unperturbed.

"My point is merely that if you have nothing to fear from Mione, who has proper motive, why should you have anything to fear from Inanna Zabini?" she said, looking at him frankly. She made a flippant gesture with her goblet. "So Madam Zabini has tired of the title of nouveau-riche and wants for a real one — how would murdering Geoffrey truly accomplish that? What is more nouveau-riche than killing for money?"

Abraxas set his goblet down and rounded the table.

"Let us retire," he said, extending his hand.

Pursing her lips again, Evangeline let herself be helped up. After murmuring something indistinctly to Tavaris, Abraxas escorted her out.

Silence reigned in their wake. Hermione was half-afraid to look at Tavaris, unsure what sort of expression she might find on his face. When she finally did, he was already looking at her.

"If you let out so much as another giggle …" he began, in a low, trembling voice. He let the threat hang unspoken in the air.

*

Those early June weeks, the air warmed inside and out. In the spirit of summer, the children played for hours each weekday afternoon in the gardens of Nottingham Hall, Crookshanks in their midst, rolling with them in the trimmed grass. The green stains on their clothes put sour looks on the faces of their parents, though none more so than Cecillia Greengrass, who began sending Daphne with play clothes that she had to be changed into each time she went outside.

At the Nott Estate, windows were left intentionally open, fresh breezes flowing into the house and flushing out the stifling isolation of its corridors and rooms. Winter cloaks were stowed away for the season, woollen garments shoved to the backs of drawers, and cotton pyjamas were exchanged for linen. Blankets upon blankets were no longer a necessity to maintain comfort in sleep, and the body heat of another, no longer a secret solace in the cold. Yet, under thinner bedsheets on a spacious mattress of cooler spots to turn to, more warmth was what Hermione craved. Not since she had first arrived in this time had the bed felt so empty.

And she knew, without wondering, why this was.

It was one of the many phenomena of human nature, and the most easily manipulatable of the lot: everyone longed to be loved. Even those humans who lacked humanity, like the Dark Lord; even if preferred, as he did prefer his love, with a hefty dose of fear. The longing itself remained.

It was what Madam Zabini preyed upon; what made Tavaris spill secrets when fingers threaded through his hair; what prevented Remus from asking questions he wanted to ask, lest Hermione stopped returning to him because of it; and what had caused that soft little "Oh" to escape Bedelia's lips when she had seen Barty's hand graze Regulus' back and, in that moment, had realised that her betrothal to the latter would only ever lead to a loveless marriage.

Hermione, too, was human, and because she was, this fact of human nature lived within her just as it did within everyone else.

She longed to be loved again.

Indeed, she already was, in one way, and by no means an insignificant one. She felt it each time Theodore sang along with her as she tucked him in, and each time he had a nightmare and came crawling into her bed. She even felt it when an afternoon of thunder and lightning made Pansy hide in her lap, when Daphne reached out, shyly, to hold her hand or accidentally called her "Lady Mummy," and when Draco skinned his knee and cried out, of all things, her name.

Hermione's current longing, however, was for a different sort of love — a sort of love that would not be found where she lived now, not ever. She longed to be held by someone who asked if she was alright, to be kissed by someone who asked if she would allow their kisses, and to be touched by someone who asked if she wanted to be touched by them at all.

She longed to be loved by someone who asked first and who cared about her answer.

And never again would she be loved in this way, she now understood, by Ron.

It was as though this understanding itself had thrust upon her the sudden arising of a long since smothered need — a desire as intrinsic as it had been repressed — and the knowledge that it would never be fulfilled by the singular person who ever had done caused an empty ache, ever-worsening.

It reached her even in the recesses of sleep, eventually, wherein it laid thickly on her mind the sort of dreams that did not cause her to wake in a cold sweat, but in a sweat, all the same, stretching her limbs under the sheets in the early morning, shivering without a chill, satisfied and unsatisfied in equal measure. The sort of dreams that made one slower in the bath after, luxuriating in the warm, lapping water when one otherwise would not; drugged by the hot steam, eyes heavily lidded; skin smoother somehow, flushed rosier, and washed more gently, under a closer eye, as if still dreaming of being under the perusal of another eye entirely.

What would they feel? And running a hand along one's leg to find out. *What would they see?* And inspecting oneself from every angle in the foggy mirror after, reluctant to reach for the towel, end the moment by getting dressed.

The memories were weaker with the passage of time, but Hermione tried to recreate them in her head. Lying in bed alone in the late of night, she tried to visualise every detail, from the freckles spanning thickly across his broad chest and thinning out down the pale expanse of his abdomen, caving under her tongue with a sharp inhale, to the flexing muscles of his shoulders beneath the sweat-slick underside of her knees, her fingers curling into vividly red hair, dampened and darkened from the shower.

She remembered that last time — instinctive and sluggish between snoozes of the alarm clock — only as well as she remembered the first, on the sagging twin-sized mattress of a *creaking* bed with a tangled orange bedspread, orange walls under the palms of her hands, a Chudley Cannons poster in her direct line of sight, laughing at it breathlessly, laughing at the *bangs* of the pipes from the ghoul in the attic above; eighteen and inexperienced, a total of ten productive minutes spent whilst Harry had been in the shed with Mr Weasley taking a look at Sirius' old flying motorbike. She remembered the moment in which Harry had returned to find them fully dressed and discussing some inconsequential matter like the weather, how he had taken one look at them — Hermione still catching her breath and Ron pink-faced and beaming — and had turned on his heel and walked straight back out.

But unlike the visuals or the contexts, the simple facts of the matter, the sensations were harder to reimagine, more abstract; it had been too long since she had felt them.

Now that Hermione understood that she could not have it — not one day soon, not one day late, not one day in a future for which she need only wait — she began to want it. Now, for the first time in years, she was recalling the tension.

Her skin tingled with it.

An act so simple as pulling on a borrowed jumper put a little skip in her stomach. Biting down on the end of a pen or a quill in thought abruptly seemed like too revealing of an oral fixation, like a silent question she was actively posing. The mere space separating her body from that of another became loaded; an albeit hesitant craving for that other person to close the distance, so she would not have to torture herself with the indecision over closing it herself.

An unobtrusive, trailing gaze on her which had previously been acknowledged but ignored, nonetheless, was transformed seemingly overnight into a near physical sensation. The gaze now made her the one who hastened to look away, rather than the one to whom this gaze had for many years belonged.

"Hot today, isn't it?" she remarked offhandedly, leaning over the kitchen sink to crack the window open.

Remus hummed behind her, sat at the table and gazing still, she knew; she could feel it on the backs of her bare legs.

"The singular week-long annual heatwave that slips all our minds until it comes round again each summer," he said in an absent-minded voice, "and shocks us with its existence all over again."

He cleared his throat. There was a rustling of paper as he returned his attention to the *Daily Post*.

"You should really check *The Daily Prophet*, too, you know," Hermione told him, as she returned to grating a block of cheese. "There may very well be more job postings in the wizarding world right now."

"The wizarding world doesn't have a Margaret Thatcher," said Remus reasonably, with even more reasonable bitterness. "But this doesn't change the fact that in the wizarding world the timeliness of my sick days is not merely coincidental, is it?"

"Odd jobs, then," she said, laying the cheese on bread, slathered in butter. "There's plenty of those in the wizarding world, and you're more than qualified for most of them."

"The term *odd jobs* just reminds me of Mundungus Fletcher."

"Those jobs are not *odd*, Remus, they're illegal." She glanced back at him over her shoulder. "Have I ever mentioned he was Edmund Lestrange's coke dealer?"

Remus blinked.

"That … is not as shocking as it should be, actually."

Five minutes later, when the cheese toasties were done, Hermione joined him at the table, sliding his plate over and nodding at his thanks. Truthfully, there had been nothing altruistic about her insistence upon making lunch; she had merely wanted to prove to herself that she was not so house-elf-dependent now that she had become incapable of making her own food. Toasties had seemed the simplest option for this test. After all, Ron had worn the apron in their house; the only time she had ever been in charge of cooking meals had involved wild mushrooms and whatever measly little fish he and Harry had managed to catch whilst the three of them starved in the woods.

She shot Remus a furtive glance as he began to eat.

"What about an apprenticeship?" she asked abruptly.

Remus met her gaze. Chewing still, he raised his eyebrows.

"Yes, because working in such close-quarters with a singular person for an extended period of time would never result in an ounce of suspicion from them," he said sarcastically, after swallowing. "Apprenticeships don't even have set hours."

"Precisely," said Hermione, before biting into her own toastie.

"There's no money in apprenticeship, Mione," said Remus, unmoved. "I fear that's the point of a job search."

"There must be someone who would be willing to pay you. Paid apprenticeships *do* exist, you know. All you'd have to do is ask around, submit a few applications …" She looked at him frankly. "You'd be happier with an apprenticeship. Not to mention, if you can manage to

get one, having done it will lead to more opportunities for future work. It's worth a try, Remus."

He put his toastie down and slumped back with a sigh of tired discontent. His bare feet slid along the tile, legs extending underneath the table, thoughtlessly, to cage in her own. She sat up straighter. Her foot twitched against his as she resolutely did not move it away.

"Anyway, it was just an idea," she said flippantly, as his eyes narrowed. "I thought I ought to at least mention it."

"I appreciate the thought," he murmured perfunctorily.

His foot brushed against her ankle, the barest amount.

Hermione very determinedly kept eating her toastie and pretended not to notice.

But Remus did. At least, she feared he did.

"Has the heat finally gotten to you, then?" he asked a while later, as he sat on the windowsill in the living area, smoking a cigarette.

"The heat?" said Hermione distractedly.

He was wearing his ratty old Led Zeppelin band t-shirt today, and there was really nothing all that spectacular about this. It was a t-shirt. Not even a nice one. Yet she could not help but recall the fact that she had worn it herself, once, whilst lying in his bed, in his arms. It had not felt terribly significant at the time. She had been seeking comfort; a safe haven. On that night, she had needed the reassurance of his heart beating beneath her ear.

Now, over two years later, Hermione was sat here imagining what she had looked like in this t-shirt, to him.

A beat too late, she realised that Remus was grinning.

"It really has gotten to you, hasn't it?"

"What has?" she asked confusedly.

His grin broadened.

"The heat," he told her, knocking the ash off his cigarette. "You're overcome."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Am I?"

He nodded, taking a drag. He blew the smoke out the open window, then said, "You're acting very peculiarly."

She sat up straighter on the sofa, suddenly anxious.

“Peculiarly?” she inquired carefully.

“I’m afraid so."

"How is that?"

"I’ve nearly finished this,” he said brightly, gesturing with his cigarette, which had indeed shortened nearly to a stub, “and I have not yet received a single admonishment. I suspect it must be the heat. I don’t suppose anything else could explain it.”

“No,” she agreed swiftly. “It must be the heat.”

A complete and utter lie, of course, and the second it left her lips, Remus’ face lit up with amused delight. He took another drag, staring right back at her.

Hermione felt terrifyingly exposed. She looked away quickly and got up to turn the television on, as she vaguely remembered saying she would do several minutes ago.

There’s nothing attractive about smoking, she reminded herself, beginning to flip through channels. She glanced back over her shoulder, making a conscious effort to pull a face. *It’s a filthy, disgusting habit.*

Had she been staring at him in disgust, however, Remus would not currently be smirking round the filter of his cigarette.

She told herself that it was likely a figment of her imagination, perhaps a result of paranoia. Even so, she had to wonder whether there was some sort of pheromone she had started giving off; something which she was actively putting into the air that had not been there before. A subtle shift; a change in body language, maybe. Whatever it was, he seemed able to sense it somehow.

As June wore on, this act of sensing became the subtext of their every interaction. Entirely unspoken, but entirely present, nonetheless.

All of a sudden, Remus was starting to test the waters. Before, he had muttered, “Excuse me,” whenever he had needed to squeeze past her; now, he put a hand on the small of her back, gently guiding her to the side. Before, he had asked her to hand him whatever was nearer to her; now, he reached across her, getting closer, however briefly. Before, his hands had dropped back to his sides after a hug; now, those hands grazed her hips first before falling away.

Hermione was half-convinced she was going mad.

It had to be pheromones, she thought, because other people began approaching her as well, more of them and more often than anyone had before. It was expected at this point that some sycophant would attempt to strike up a conversation the second they spotted her on her own, but now many more of those sycophants were men.

Young men.

“Shame about the rain, isn’t it?”

Hermione glanced sideways to find Carden Travers — the younger brother of Eamon Travers and Aisling McKinnon — standing abruptly beside her in front of the excessively large gift table in the ballroom at Malfoy Manor.

He resembled Aisling a great deal more than Eamon did, with his blue eyes, thick brown curls, and broad, almost burly stature. Most of all, he resembled their mother, Lady Morgan. There was a certain liveliness to him, however — a youthful, bodily ease — that none of them had possessed.

“I’d heard there was going to be some sort of flying contest before Madam Malfoy had to move the party inside,” Carden said, sending Hermione an easy smile. “I was looking forward to seeing them all skidding along on their toy brooms.”

“That would have made for quite the sight, I’m sure,” she said.

He added a big, bow-topped box to the already mountainous pile of gifts Draco had accumulated thus far in celebration of his fourth birthday.

“Do you fly much yourself?” Carden asked.

“No.”

He smiled again, like she’d said something funny.

“Not a fan, I gather?”

“No,” repeated Hermione.

“Was it a bad experience?” he asked conversationally, as Lopsi the house-elf came by with a silver tray laden with gleaming goblets of sangria (made with Malfoy Apothecaries’ Superior Red, of course). He took two goblets and handed one to her.

“You could say that,” said Hermione, narrowing her eyes suspiciously.

“Perhaps all you need is a good experience, then,” said Carden, holding her gaze intently. “One to cancel out the bad.”

She stared at him in disbelief. He was not truly implying what she thought he was implying, was he?

He gave a loose shrug and lifted his goblet to his lips.

“Just a thought,” he murmured lightly, before taking a sip.

“Marlene McKinnon was a friend of mine, you know,” she almost said. The words were like hot bile rising in her throat. But if she were to dig up more dirt on these people than that which she already had — if she were to obtain more names, like the name of whomever had

slaughtered that family of goblins — she could not go saying anything that would discourage the rumours.

Those rumours were what gave Hermione power here.

Either she could have been a victim, and so was a victim still, or she could have been important to the Dark Lord. Only the latter would loosen the Death Eaters' tongues for her.

With this thought in mind, she swallowed back the bile, fixed him with a dubious look, and replied, "Have thoughts like that often, do you?"

Carden gave her a sly smirk.

"Thoughts about good experiences?" he asked, in an undertone, his eyes glinting mischievously. "Or thoughts about good experiences that might be had with you?"

"My, aren't *you* bold?"

"I can be."

"Colour me surprised, then," she said, feigning fascination. "I was under the impression that all the bold ones were gone. Yet here you stand …" she gave him a slow onceover, "… uncaught."

Carden looked pleased with himself.

"I suppose I, unlike them, understand that there's a time and place for boldness."

"Such as a four-year-old's birthday party?"

He laughed brightly.

"I'd heard you tutor some of the little rascals running about here," he said. "Be honest — are children not the boldest of us all?"

"Well, now you sound like an old wiseman."

"I can be," he told her again.

Hermione raised a disbelieving eyebrow.

"Can you, really?"

"Lady Mione," said Carden, with a slow smile, "I can be whatever you want."

Good fucking Lord.

Approximately twenty minutes later, it was Lancaster Selwyn who was sidling up to Hermione, this time at the buffet table. He came armed with an anecdote not about the weather or flying but about his wife's "cold-hearted insistence" upon limiting the intake of sugar in their home, which was arguably worse.

It did not help matters that said wife was currently occupied on the other side of the ballroom, completely unaware. She was helping Narcissa oversee Pin the Tail On the Donkey — a game which, in this context, involved creeping up on unsuspecting guests and sticking a tail on them that would, upon contact with someone's bottom, transform into an actual donkey tail that swished animatedly when they walked (Gaspar presently had three tails, courtesy of each of his nieces).

Lancaster placed a sugar-frosted Victoria sponge cake on his plate and shot Hermione a conspiratorial smirk.

"Our little secret," he whispered, winking.

He brushed his hand against her back as he swaggered away, making her stiffen in discomfort.

At this point, Hermione was accustomed to the Death Eaters' deference. She did not particularly enjoy it, to say the least, but to not have grown used to it over the course of this many years was an impossibility. At last, she was prepared to use it to her advantage.

The fact remained, however, that deference did not normally involve winking and making entirely suggestive suggestions about good experiences yet to be enjoyed. Honestly, what had happened to, "How do you do, Lady Nott?"

If this truly were the result of some biological phenomenon, she hoped desperately that Tavaris would never pick up on it.

Just then, a head poked out from beneath the tablecloth.

"*Psst*. *Ma*."

Hermione nearly jumped. She pressed a hand to her heart, her eyes widening incredulously.

"*What on earth are you doing under the table*?"

Theodore held a finger to his lips to shush her.

"We're hiding from Pansy," he whispered. "She's trying to pin a tail on Blaise. Can you pass me two treacle tarts, please?"

She lifted the tablecloth.

"Out!"

"Shh! Pansy will hear you!"

"*Theodore Tavaris William —*"

"OK, OK!" said Theodore quickly, looking alarmed. He pointed left. "But we're going go this way so she doesn't spot us."

“You have ten seconds,” said Hermione severely.

With haste, he disappeared beneath the tablecloth and began whispering in a panic, “Go, go, go!” Precisely eight seconds later, he and a small, dark-skinned boy in violet dress robes emerged together from the other end of the buffet table. Hand-in-hand, the pair sprinted to the nearest group of adults whose legs could be used to take cover.

Half-exasperated and half-amused, Hermione turned away — and just in the nick of time, too, because six-year-old Marcus Flint was holding one of the donkey tails and standing much too close.

“Would you like to rethink that decision, Marcus?” she asked, raising a threatening eyebrow.

He gazed up at her in terror.

“I’ll tell you what — do you see that wizard over there?” she said after a second, pointing to Lancaster Selwyn in the distance. “He was telling me just the other day that he’s always fancied having a tail.”

With a wicked grin, Marcus dashed off toward his new target.

Unfortunately for Draco, this little party game did end in tears — his own, that was, since Daphne had successfully placed a whopping number of sixteen tails on the bottoms of various guests, putting his measly eleven to shame. He only quit wailing when, to everyone’s great shock, Lucius sacrificed himself to the cause.

What followed was a mad scramble to capture photographic evidence of the event — and then, unsurprisingly, a minor case of an exploding camera that caused several partygoers to shriek all at once.

Lucius lowered his wand, still smoking at the tip. The disintegrated camera lay in a pile of ash at the feet of an aghast-looking Creighton Rosier.

“Dad, quick!” Draco said excitedly. “Blow something else up!”

“*Yes*!” said Pansy emphatically.

“A chair!” suggested Vincent Crabbe, with enthusiasm.

“No, the buffet!” said Gregory Goyle, equally enthused.

“You can’t blow up the furniture!” cried Ernie Macmillan.

“Do it, Mr Malfoy!” shouted Marcus Flint.

“*Please*!” implored both Flora and Hestia Carrow at once.

“C’mon, Mr Malfoy!”

“Blow something up!”

“Do it! Do it!”

“Blow up the cake!” Theodore chimed in, bouncing on the balls of his feet. “It’ll go *everywhere* and get in *everyone’s faces*!”

Draco scowled at him.

“No one’s blowing up *my* birthday cake!” he shouted indignantly. “I’ll have Dad blow up *yours*!”

Theodore gasped loudly. At once, his eyes darted around the ballroom, wide and frantic.

“MA!” he bellowed when he spotted her a few metres away. “CAN I HAVE AN EXPLODING BIRTHDAY CAKE?”

Everyone looked at Hermione.

“Absolutely not,” she said instantly.

“*Please*, can I have an exploding birthday cake?”

“No.”

To her dismay, his eyes found Tavaris next.

“Well, you certainly cannot have one now,” Tavaris told him reasonably. “Everyone will be expecting it. The shock is half the fun.”

Hermione scoffed, rolling her eyes.

Theodore nodded slowly in understanding. He held his hands up and looked around at them all.

“Don’t worry, everyone!” he announced to the room at large. “I will *definitely not* be having an exploding birthday cake! You mustn’t be afraid to wear your very best robes!”

His proclamation was met with laughter from the adults, all fond and amused. Gaspar ruffled his hair, grinning broadly.

Someone snickered beside Hermione. She turned her head; Carden Travers had returned.

“Quite the kid, your son,” he remarked.

Her spine straightened automatically.

“Yes, he is.”

“Does he get his sense of humour from you?” Carden asked.

“His humour?” said Hermione, nonplussed. “From me? Are you ser—?”

Out of nowhere, a hand landed on her shoulder; she put on a show of being startled to cover up her flinch.

Tavaris held Carden's gaze blankly for one very long, very uncomfortable moment, and then the latter inclined his head to Hermione with a tight-lipped smile and walked away.

"Isn't *he* bold?" muttered Tavaris, staring after him.

She didn't say anything.

Surprisingly swift, Bedelia was at her side.

"Pardon me, I hope I am not interrupting," she told Tavaris, in a soft voice, smiling placidly. She looked at Hermione. "Mione, about tea next Saturday, I was hoping we might go to Rosa Lee Teabag, if you do not mind. I have some shopping I must do in Diagon Alley."

No such tea was scheduled for next Saturday.

Hermione nodded.

"I wouldn't mind at all," she said pleasantly. "Shall I meet you there, then? Say, two o'clock?"

"Oh, two would be wonderful, thank you," said Bedelia, with a grateful look. "Why don't I meet you at the Leaky Cauldron? We can work our way down the High Street before stopping for tea."

"Brilliant."

Internally, Hermione was grimacing; with an exact time and place stated in front of Tavaris, she did not know how she would be able to visit Gringotts, let alone Remus, this weekend. She could not go to the bank beforehand, for she would be leaving the house too early. And if she went to Remus' flat after, she might run the risk of returning too late.

Bedelia was lingering, clasping and unclasping her hands in front of herself. She looked as though she were attempting to come up with more to say, whilst at the same time doing her best to look natural.

She did this a lot.

Not once had she ever said anything about what she had seen or not seen, that day in the gardens of Nottingham Hall, but she did insert herself into conversations — something Hermione had never witnessed her do in any other circumstance — and she did linger. Sometimes, Hermione suspected that this was Bedelia's subtle way of letting Tavaris know that she was watching.

And when Bedelia was watching —

His grip loosened, and his hand slipped away.

“Perhaps you can help me pick out a new hat,” Bedelia piped up again finally. “Nearly everyone is wearing pastels now, you know.”

Tavaris made a disparaging noise under his breath.

“You ought to have seen Narcissa’s hat at our meeting earlier this month,” Bedelia went on, her smile unwavering. “It was custom made from Twilfitt and Tattings.”

“Our meeting?” repeated Hermione inquiringly, and then she remembered. “Oh, yes — sorry — it slips my mind sometimes that you, too, are a part of the Ladies’ Tea Society.”

Bedelia appeared bashful.

“I am not among the more vocal members, admittedly.”

Vocal members, Hermione thought, supressing a scoff. *As in, nosy ... gossiping ...* Her eyes widened.

She let her gaze wander the ballroom, pausing on well over a dozen made-up faces, each of which belonged to a member of the Ladies’ Tea Society, and most of which belonged, as well, to the wife or mother or sister of a Death Eater.

Was there ever a space in which more information was freely shared than a space belonging solely to women?

Dread filled Hermione before she had even reached a decision.

That night after wrestling a sugar-fuelled Theodore into bed, she sat down at her desk and penned a letter that she had never in her wildest dreams imagined penning.

Dear Lady Rohesia Selwyn,

I heard from Abraxas Malfoy the other week that you have recently been elected the new Chair of the Ladies’ Tea Society, making you the witch best suited to address my inquiry. I have found myself curious; does my invitation still stand?

Regards,

Lady M. Nott

Approximately ten minutes after she had sent it off with Dinky, Tavaris was at her bedroom door, holding the letter aloft and looking thoroughly mystified.

“Mione … *darling* … what the fuck?”

Hermione felt herself flush with embarrassment.

“It’s just as I said in there,” she told him cagily, nodding to the letter. “I have grown curious.”

“Curiosity, I can understand, but *this*?” Tavaris blinked several times, his mouth hanging partly open in an expression of complete incomprehension. “Darling, whyever in the world would you wish this sort of suffering upon yourself?”

Feeling cornered, she threw her hands up. “I don’t know!” she exclaimed unthinkingly. “It’s something to do!”

He approached to check her temperature, laying the back of his hand against her forehead.

“I assure you that I am perfectly within my right mind!” Hermione snapped, swatting his hand away.

“Evidently not!” Tavaris snapped back. “*This* is insanity!”

“Actually, by definition, insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result,” she said, very matter-of-factly. “And this is not that.”

“I beg to differ,” said Tavaris, hovering beside her desk chair. “You go half-mad every time you must spend more than fifteen minutes in the company of those witches, and yet here you are, hoping to join their little club as if it will somehow prove itself to be an even *infinitesimally* less aneurysm-inducing experience.”

“Well —” Hermione floundered, then caved with a frustrated huff. “Oh, just let me have my aneurysm in peace, then!”

Tavaris drew his wand and checked her for Hexes and Jinxes before agreeing to post the letter.

*

The last Saturday afternoon of June was, by good fortune, comfortably warm and only partly cloudy. Diagon Alley was a rather strange setting, Hermione found, in which to be walking alongside Bedelia. In her experience, shopping, specifically on a sunny weekend afternoon, involved a great deal of dispersed and distracted chatter; stories half-told between shops, or half-listened to between lifting clothes hangers for an opinion.

But Bedelia seemed to speak solely with purpose, and purpose was something of which she tended to possess very little.

She strolled sedately along, which Hermione was not very good at doing herself, and spoke up merely to comment on the weather or suggest their next stop. Inside the shops themselves, such as in Gaberlunzie Garments, she mostly brushed her knuckles against things and murmured, “Oh, isn’t this darling?” before moving on to the next display.

The High Street was bustling that day. Although, within the next couple of weeks, it would undoubtedly worsen, once everyone’s children had returned home for the summer holidays. Hermione had never dared visit during the last week of August, when the Weasleys would be doing their back-to-school shopping. She feared she would be unable to stop herself from

bursting into tears if she ever bumped into Bill or Percy coming out a shop, or spotted Charlie in the window of Quality Quidditch Supplies, or worse, heard from a distance as Mrs Weasley hollered at Fred and George.

And if she happened to come across Ron and Ginny, each toddling along after their parents and siblings, there was a chance she might spontaneously combust on the spot.

Truthfully, the sight of red hair alone caused her heart to miss a beat. Whilst picking up a few essentials in Madam Primpernelle's Beautifying Potions, she spotted a young, auburn-haired shop clerk out of the corner of her eye and nearly choked on her own spit.

Beside her, Bedelia plucked one uniquely-shaped bottle off a shelf and studied the label. She then looked up to ask her first purposeful question of the day.

"Might you have any idea what Narcissa uses for her skin?"

"Hmm?" Hermione blinked at her distractedly, then gave her head a shake in an attempt to focus. "Pardon me, what Narcissa uses?"

Bedelia nodded.

"As a matter of fact, I have a bit more than an idea," Hermione confessed bitterly. "Would you like the whole regimen?" At another nod, she let out a discontented sigh, turned, and added over her shoulder, "Follow me."

When they exited the shop ten minutes later, paper packages tucked under each of their arms, Bedelia looked as though she could not believe her luck.

"How did you know precisely which products to get?" she asked Hermione, in a hushed voice, evidently awed. "Did she tell you?"

"No," said Hermione heavily, not looking at her. "It used to be her job to restock my things. I believe she simply bought double of whatever she got herself."

"Her *job*?" repeated Bedelia, in bewilderment, as if she had never heard of such a thing.

Hermione swallowed.

"Task, really," she admitted.

"Oh."

And then Bedelia went back to saying very little.

"Shall we pop into Pettichaps?" Hermione suggested after a minute, forcing some cheer into her voice. "Theodore is fresh out of pyjamas that fit. And his socks — oh, don't even get me started on his socks — scarcely a single matching pair left! Honestly, I don't know what he does with them."

Not long after they had entered the quaint, colourful children's clothing shop, Bedelia brightened somewhat. At least, she stopped looking so unnecessarily guilty, as if she were under the impression that she was somehow to blame. Maybe one day Hermione would have strength enough to comfort someone else about her own situation, but as that day was not today, she merely pointed out a pyjama set that had tiny sailboats on it and let Bedelia distract herself with fawning.

As Hermione brought her purchases to the counter, getting out her pouch of leftover Galleons, she spotted Bedelia stalking towards the infant section. She had a strangely shifty look on her face, as though she might have been doing something criminal, by studying, through subtle glances, the array of swaddling blankets, the tiny dresses and robes, and the impossibly small socks.

They visited Gambol and Japes Wizarding Joke Shop next, so Hermione could pick up a deck of Exploding Snap cards to satisfy Theodore's newfound desire to watch things blow up. Then, with a twinge of guilt, she took Bedelia's arm and said, in a careful undertone, "Would you be willing to keep a secret for me?"

Another secret, in truth.

Bedelia tensed but nodded.

Hermione steered them in the direction of the Owl Post Office. She did not say a word, and nor did Bedelia, until they had entered through the glass-paned door and approached the counter, where she requested a barn owl from the wiry-haired Postmaster. Without prompting, Bedelia kept an eye on the front windows, serving as a lookout, whilst Hermione wrote a short missive:

Tea with a friend today. All is well.

— M

She folded it up, shot a look at the Postmaster, who was poring over a *Transfiguration Today* magazine, and threw Bedelia a backwards glance before dipping one of the spare quills back in the inkwell and writing Remus' address on the front of the letter. She gave the Postmaster a Galleon — at which his eyebrows shot up — and told him to keep the change, then hastily ushered Bedelia back out onto the street, lest they lingered long enough for someone to notice them.

"I'm sorry," Hermione murmured to her, as they resumed their strolling. "I swear, you won't have to lie for me about this."

"It's all right," Bedelia murmured back.

"It's really not."

“I do not mind, Mione,” she said, looking at her seriously.

Hermione sighed.

“Even so —”

Abruptly, Bedelia leaned into her hard, causing them to veer right and nearly collide with a stout wizard in a top hat, who consequently began juggling his armful of packages and nearly dropped the lot. Hermione righted them both quickly as Bedelia’s feet tripped over each other, heels wobbling on the cobblestone.

“Sorry,” Bedelia gasped breathlessly. She blinked several times as she straightened up, using Hermione for support. “Just — slightly dizzy, all of a sudden. I skipped lunch.”

“Do you think you might faint?” asked Hermione worriedly, before her gaze caught on something behind Bedelia.

They had stopped out front of a narrow, brown-brick building. Although she could not make out the words from this distance, Hermione knew what it read on the burnished bronze plaque beside the tall oak door. This address had been printed on the chatterbox Emmeline Vance had given her almost three years ago: the Headquarters of the Magical Child Welfare Association.

It disquieted Hermione just to look at this building. Every time she passed it, she was filled with worry that Theodore might someday wind up there. He would never be removed from his father’s care, this much was certain; the children of powerful people hardly ever were. She worried, all the same.

After all, Theodore would, at one point, be a child without a guardian. When Tavaris would first go to Azkaban, Theodore would still be a minor. It would be just one summer, and then he would go back to Hogwarts for his sixth year, and by the end of the term, he would be legally able to look after himself.

For the duration of that one summer, however, she realised that it would fall to the Magical Child Welfare Association to place him somewhere.

“Mione?”

Hermione’s mouth had gone quite dry. She swallowed painfully and forced her feet to resume moving.

“Sorry,” she said, giving her head a small shake to clear it. “Just — erm — distracted. Are you alright?”

Bedelia followed where her gaze had gone; her lips flattened to form a grim line. Without answering, she tightened the loop of their arms and lead them both onward, somehow more sedately than before. They walked the rest of the way to Rosa Lee Teabag in weighted silence.

Hermione did not know why the thought had just come to her now. Surely, Theodore would be placed in the care of Narcissa for that summer, seeing as she was his godmother. That had been the whole reason Hermione had insisted upon her and Lucius as godparents rather than Abraxas and Evangeline. Obviously, Abraxas would not be able to look after Theodore whilst dead, and she had no idea what had become of Evangeline — whether she would still be alive or not, in the futures both near and distant.

But this decision had been made without any consideration of the extended family. Hermione had not known then that Theomund, Rawdon, Terric, and Barnett had all served the Dark Lord. Theomund's past position as Director of the European Potions Trade and Distribution Company would have been a massive boon. There was no doubt that the Dark Lord would want that advantage the second time around as well.

With Theodore underage, Terric would be next in line, she thought, as she and Bedelia entered the quaint, floral-filled teashop. Small round tables set with blushing bouquets and lace doilies were squeezed in a scatter throughout the room, into which light floated from the front windows, covered only partly by frilly, white curtains. Under one such window, the pair sat, each stowing their purchases beneath the table.

Hermione gazed out the window, her mind racing.

It would be significantly more beneficial to the Dark Lord if Terric were in Britain. He would no longer have Tavaris to contact his cousins for him, after all. Besides, until Theodore came of age, Terric — now that Theomund was dead — would be the singular person with access to the vault that stored all the funding for the war. It would also be helpful to have the Potions Association Board of Governors continue to come round for dinner, right where the Dark Lord could reach them — right where he could reach Pius Thicknesse, who would be put under the Imperius Curse sometime that same summer to subsequently be used as a political puppet; the next Minister for Magic following Fudge's resignment and the murder of his successor, Rufus Scrimgeour.

There was no doubt about it; Terric would be summoned to Britain. And being Theodore's guardian would be the perfect excuse.

Just then, a witch with loosely-pinned, carob hair and a weary, young face came over to inform Hermione and Bedelia of today's specials. Taken aback, Hermione stared at her as she listed the teas in a slight, rolling accent.

It was Carola Ebner, the Muggle-born seamstress who had been sacked from Twilfitt and Tattings. Hermione had not seen her since the Yule Gala of '80, at which Miss Ebner had checked cloaks. She vaguely remembered informing her that she would be in contact whilst she had been horrifically high off an excess of the Draught of Peace.

"I wasn't aware you worked here, Miss Ebner," she said, frowning up at her.

Miss Ebner stiffened instantly. She then seemed to recognise Hermione, and her shoulders untensed.

“Oh. Hello, Mrs Nott,” she said, an embarrassed flush darkening her cheeks. “Yes, I have worked here —” she appeared to think about it, “— over a year now. Yes. Last winter, I started.”

“Are you still doing any seamstress work?” asked Hermione, her frown deepening.

“No. Only for myself. But,” Miss Ebner added, with a forced-looking smile, “I did the new curtains, you know.” She pointed to the window, with its dainty dressings.

Hermione felt nauseous.

“They’re lovely,” she remarked.

“Thank you, Mrs Nott. You are always very kind.” This time, Miss Ebner’s smile seemed genuine. She straightened up, holding her quill to her notepad. “Do you know what you will be having?”

“The jasmine blend, please,” said Bedelia.

Hermione barely glanced at the menu.

“The same for me, please, and the lunch tower to share.”

Miss Ebner jotted their orders down, took their menus, and left, winding mechanically through the tables and disappearing behind a pink curtain at the back of the shop.

“How are you feeling?” Hermione asked after a minute, looking back at Bedelia.

“Better, thank you,” she replied, but she still looked paler than usual and her smile was too strained to be convincing.

Hermione recalled the way she had looked at the infant section in Pettichaps and wondered if perhaps she was pregnant, and just didn’t know it yet. Thankfully, after her first cup of tea and a few finger sandwiches, most of the natural colour had returned to her cheeks. Hermione was too anxious to eat much herself, but she forced down a couple of scones, pausing after each bite to ensure it would not come back up. Neither of them spoke whilst they polished off their pots of tea, each one lost in thought; more than once, Hermione tore her eyes from the window to find that Bedelia was staring out of it as well.

Finally, when they had finished and paid and Miss Ebner had disappeared into the back again, Hermione dropped a couple of additional, guilt-ridden Galleons on the table and led Bedelia out.

Later that afternoon, when Hermione returned to the Nott Estate, she handed her wand over to Goppy, who made grabbing motions until she let him relieve her of her purchases as well, and immediately went into the sitting room in search of Tavaris.

Only, Tavaris was not there.

She checked the study next, then the library, with no success. Finally, she forced herself to try upstairs. Her heart in her throat, she peered into the drawing room, swallowing thickly past the lump when she found it empty.

Reluctantly, she turned toward the doors to the master suite. She hesitated, her stomach churning, before cracking open one door and peering out into the long, dark corridor beyond.

On the right, an old vase sat emptily on a side table, above which hung a blank portrait, its occupant currently elsewhere. On the left, there were a pair of doors; she guessed that this was the entrance to the terrace, where the post was delivered. A grey runner rug led the way down to the other end of the corridor, where the doors to Tavaris' bedroom were firmly closed.

"Tavaris?" she called out, hovering at the threshold.

The name echoed down the corridor.

After thrice repeating it, the doors on the left opened. Tavaris' poked his head out into the corridor to look at her in bemusement.

"What are you doing up here, darling?"

It was a reasonable question; after all, Hermione had never stepped foot in this corridor before. She had not dared.

"I'd hoped to ask you about something," she said, before she could lose her courage and turn back.

"By all means then," said Tavaris, and to her dismay, he disappeared back onto the terrace, leaving one door ajar.

Hermione steeled herself, biting down on the inside of her cheek. She walked quickly down the corridor to join him outside.

Out on the terrace, Tavaris had the crossword out and was sat comfortably on an armchair that he must have Conjured for himself. He was smoking, an ashtray resting on a small metal table alongside a few scraps of evening post and a silver cigarette case, which had his initials engraved on the front.

His screech owl, Odin, was perched on the stone bannister, cleaning his feathers. Until now, Hermione had only ever gotten glimpses of him out the window. He lifted his head, as though having sensed her gaze, and gave her a vaguely quizzical look, perhaps wondering what she was doing here.

"I — erm — saw Carola Ebner today," she started nervously, looking out across the grounds.

"Who?"

"Carola Ebner, the Muggle-born seamstress who —"

“Ah, yes. Her.” Tavaris wrinkled his nose slightly and marked a few letters on the crossword, a hand-rolled cigarette hanging from between his lips. He removed it, and as he exhaled, he said, in a smoke-thick voice, “How is she faring these days?”

“She works at Rosa Lee Teabag in Diagon Alley,” said Hermione with a weary sigh, wrapping her arms around herself. “Seeing her, it …” she bit down on her cheek again, “… it made me feel sick to my stomach. I mean, she was a *seamstress* — at Twilfitt and Tattings, no less — and now she’s serving tea and fixing finger sandwiches. I hardly think that’s what she wants to be doing with her life.”

Rubbing her temple, she moved to lean back against the bannister. She crossed her arms, letting out another sigh, and glanced absently behind herself.

Her heart shot straight back to her throat.

The dull, deadened ground was very long way down.

Suddenly, it seemed as though the grass were rushing up towards her, or perhaps that she was rushing towards it, having gone over the railing without realising it, and now she was plummeting, the air rushing past her ears, the ground growing closer and closer and —

Hermione shoved herself away from the railing. Her chest tight, she staggered over to rest instead on the arm of Tavaris’ chair.

“It’s not fair,” she said tremulously, after a minute. “She shouldn’t have to be there, not when … I mean, she was sacked all because …”

She was reluctant to finish, for she was entirely aware, the knowledge weighing heavily on her shoulders, that she was not speaking to someone who would be at all sympathetic about this.

Tavaris lowered the crossword and looked at her, narrowing his eyes shrewdly.

“What did you want to ask me about, Mione?”

“Erm … w—well, it’s not regarding that, actually,” said Hermione tensely. She was stalling. “It’s really — it’s not important. I merely found myself wondering … w—what is Terric’s area of study?”

He frowned, taken aback.

“It’s only that … well … judging from the journals I have read, everyone in the Nott family seems to have had incredibly … *specific* interests. I know Rawdon is a Magizoologist, Barnett is a magical historian, your father was a magical genealogist, and you — well, you are rather a poor example, aren’t you, being somewhat of a jack of all trades —”

“And master of none,” he finished, snorting softly. “You wound me, darling.”

“Anyway,” she went on, ignoring this, “I just realised today that I have no idea what Terric does.”

“Ah.” He flicked the ash off his cigarette, nodding briefly. “Well, Terric is an alchemist.”

Hermione felt the colour flee her face.

“An alchemist?” she said, making sure she’d heard correctly.

“Surprised, are you?” replied Tavaris, in amusement. “I suppose he doesn’t seem the sort, does he?”

He took a long drag before continuing, turning his head to blow the smoke away from her.

“Then again, he always has been a bit shoddy at learning new languages. My great-aunt Diera used to say he has a ‘stubborn tongue.’ Believe me, he speaks more intelligently in German.”

Hermione teetered where she perched, struck by a bout of dizziness. She felt him steady her with a hand on her waist. Blindly, she stared into the distance.

The first journal that had been found on Harry’s raid had begun largely with notes on alchemy. Three of the four hands that had written in it had not appeared immediately, for those hands had belonged to those who had been in Azkaban at the time: Rookwood and, as she strongly suspected, Tavaris and Dolohov.

Hermione had never stopped wondering who would have been around still to write that first entry in June of 1996. It had to have been someone who had a background in alchemy and who would have been there that summer, not merely in Britain but in the very place where the journal would eventually be found. And now she knew just who filled those requirements.

Terric Nott — who seemed to save all his jokes for when it was entirely inappropriate to be joking, who shouted “Froschfesser” across the dinner table at his French cousins, and who had gifted her a pearl necklace and a subscription to *Potions Monthly* last Christmas — had begun the research on time-related magic.

It felt like a knife jammed in her back. No matter how much Hermione twisted herself, she could not grasp the handle to pull it out.

Chapter End Notes

Remember the Slow Burn tag? Yeah. I meant that. But, like, it's burning now.

P.S. The entire next chapter is Theo's POV. Happy New Year;)

Pa Goes to Prison

Chapter Summary

> Everyone's got somewhere to go
> And they're gonna leave me here on my own
> And here it goes
> I'm just a kid
> And life is a nightmare
> — I'm Just a Kid, Simple Plan

Chapter Notes

> CW: implied/referenced (past) domestic abuse, Minor Character Death, and rich kids complaining they've nothing to do whilst lounging poolside.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For the entirety of the journey from Hogsmeade Village to Kings Cross Station in London, Theo's insides refused to unknot themselves. The conversation he had had with his Head of House the evening before kept replaying itself in his head.

"You will, in all likelihood, be picked up by someone from the Magical Child Welfare Association," Professor Snape had informed him, sat dourly behind his desk in his eerily-lit dungeon office. "That is procedure. However, considering your father's … *crimes* … we may expect some — shall we say — interference … I advise you to conduct yourself with caution."

Beside Theo, Draco was sulking, continuously tearing the wrappings off his sweets and tossing them onto the compartment floor with such aggression that one would think the wrappings had wronged him personally. When he uncovered Professor Dumbledore's card in one of his Chocolate Frogs, he hurled it out the window.

The only people to join them were Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle. Most of their friends had found seats elsewhere on the train. Madam Zabini, the Greengrasses, the Parkinsons, the Bulstrodes, and even Tracey's father, Mr Davis, had all instructed their children to keep their distance in public. Theo could not blame them. He only wished that he, too, could be among those who stayed away, rather than among those to stay away from.

"It won't be long," Draco assured them all, perhaps for the dozenth time that week. "The Dementors have chosen their side. I'd wager they'll be out before the end of July."

“Yeah,” Vince said, as he and Greg both nodded fiercely. “The Dark Lord wouldn’t leave your dad in there, Malfoy.”

“No, he wouldn’t,” said Draco confidently.

“And when he gets him out, he’ll get the others out, too.”

“Unless he decides not to,” Theo muttered, flipping a page of Gilderoy Lockhart’s *Marauding with Monsters*.

“Just what is *that* supposed to mean?” said Draco.

“They failed him, didn’t they?”

“But that was Potter’s fault,” Greg pointed out dimly.

“Precisely, Goyle — and the Dark Lord recognises that, Nott. He knows if it weren’t for Potter and his merry band of Mudbloods and Muggle-lovers —”

Theo swung his book sidelong into Draco’s face.

“Shit, my bad, mate,” he said, as Draco pressed his hand to his nose, his eyes wide and astounded. “My arm, it just — spasms sometimes, you know — can’t control it.”

Draco’s face got all pink and twisty. He released his nose to smack Theo upside the head.

“*Get a bloody grip, Theo*,” he gritted out. “You think you won’t be hearing that and *worse* this summer? You think you’ll be able to do anything about it? Grow up.”

Theo clenched his teeth, his cheeks burning, and refocused on his book: *Chapter II: Of Impish Idiosyncrasies*. Written at the top of the page in blue ink was, *A title better suited to his autobiography.*

The knots in his stomach loosened, just slightly.

After a long moment, Draco quit glaring at the side of his face and turned back to Vince and Greg. Not for the first time, he brought up the matter of payback; ever the predictable bunch, the three of them soon went off to see about getting some. Consequently, when the train heaved to a halt at Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters a short while later and Theo left the compartment to join the throng of students in the narrow corridor outside, he came across three suspiciously large slugs surrounded by a group of squealing first-years.

Further down the corridor, he spotted the heads of Terry Boot and Michael Corner sticking out above the shuffling crowd; they were throwing him backwards glances and snickering.

“Be sure to let their mothers know, Nott!” a merry-sounding voice rang out from the same direction; it was Ernie Macmillan. “We wouldn’t want them to worry!”

Theo shot an exasperated look at the slugs. He shook his head to himself and proceeded out onto the packed, steam-filled platform, where he began craning his neck for either Draco’s,

Vince's, or Greg's mothers or some sign of a welfare worker — whomever he spotted first.

At the sight of Narcissa, he headed in her direction.

"Where is Draco?" she asked at once, peering behind him.

"He's still on the train. Vince and Greg as well," said Theo awkwardly. "They're the — er — slugs, this time, ma'am."

Narcissa's expression became pinched.

"Potter and his friends again, I presume?"

He shrugged.

"I didn't see it happen."

She inhaled deeply, as if restraining herself, then tore her eyes from the train to inspect him.

"Behind me, Theodore — don't look — is an Auror by the name of Emmeline Vance," she said in a low voice, smoothing out the shoulders of his jumper. "She will be escorting you to the Headquarters of the Magical Child Welfare Association to see to the question of your guardianship."

Professor Snape had been right about the interference.

"Your cousin is on his way as we speak. It is my estimate that you will be presented with the choice between staying with him or coming to live at the manor." As she untucked one flap of his collar from his jumper and flattened the other that had been sticking up, she warned him, "*Act wisely*."

With that, she turned and pointed out the Auror, who had pinned-up hair, sharp eyebrows, and an even sharper gaze, and who stood tall and important even whilst wearing an emerald shawl. She held a sign which read, *T. NOTT*, and which she did away with when she caught his gaze.

Theo willed his stomach to settle.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said.

Narcissa smiled tensely and gave him a tiny nod. As he set off, lugging his trunk and empty owl cage, he saw her whirl round and stride swiftly toward the train.

"Mr Nott," Auror Vance said when Theo reached her, and he could tell at once that she was someone who put up with no nonsense, "I am Auror Emmeline Vance. I have come to escort you to the M.C.W.A.'s headquarters to sort out where you'll be staying this summer. Do you have all your belongings?"

Theo nodded. "My owl flew ahead," he explained, at her glance at the empty cage.

“Then if you would follow me, the car is just out front.”

With his head bowed, he followed her down the steadily emptying platform towards the ticket barrier.

On the other side of the station, Muggles with briefcases were squeezing past one another with muttered “Pardon me”s and “On your left”s, each in a hurry to catch their train home. Vance navigated the way to the exit with brisk ease. In seconds, she and Theo were nearing the doors, where a big group was crowded around a long-necked woman, a man resembling a walrus, and who appeared to be their very large, very nervous son. Among the group was Harry Potter, an assortment of Weasleys, a witch with brightly-coloured hair who wore a Weird Sisters band t-shirt, and a wizard with a trench coat and a bowler cap tipped over one eye, whom Theo recognised at once as Alastor Moody.

At the back of the group and looking shabbier than ever was Professor Lupin. He was smiling as he greeted a couple who both had a much more polished appearance than his own, and whom, upon noticing Hermione Granger in their midst, Theo realised must have been her Muggle parents.

Vance directed him to give the group a wide berth.

It was a relief to reach the street, and thus be officially free of the prying eyes of his peers and their parents for the summer. It was less of a relief, however, to sit alone in the backseat of the Ministry car as Vance exchanged her shawl for her uniform and pulled out of her parking spot to join the evening traffic.

He tried not to glance at her too often, but those maroon robes never failed to discomfit him.

“Your father’s trial is scheduled for this Thursday,” she told him, after a long enough while to also tell him that she was not the sort to fill silence with needless chatter. A shame: Theo liked that sort.

“Will I be expected to attend?” he asked.

“Don’t you want to?”

He shrugged and looked out the window.

“I can read about it after in the *Prophet*.”

Charing Cross Road was not far. Soon enough, Vance was parking the car and leading him out the back of the Leaky Cauldron pub and straight through the hidden entrance to Diagon Alley.

It was not yet dark enough for the lamps lining the shopfronts to be lit. Even so, few people were about, and most of them appeared to be in a hurry to leave. On the way down the High Street, Theo saw a total of five shopkeepers locking up and drawing their curtains shut.

“They’re remembering,” Vance remarked. “Good.”

The Headquarters of the Magical Child Welfare Association were located on the South Side of Diagon Alley at Number 88, several doors down from Whizz Hard Books and *The Daily Prophet*'s main office and several up from some new shop that had blue smoke coming out one of its upper windows.

A short set of slanted stone steps with wrought-iron railings lead up to the very tall oak door, beside which a burnished bronze plaque read: *Headquarters of the Magical Child Welfare Association, est. 1968.*

It gave Theo pause, for this did not seem to him like an organisation that should reasonably be so newly established. What had anyone done before 1968?

Vance caught his gaze and tapped the sign.

"Uncoincidentally the same year corporal punishment was last permitted at Hogwarts," she said, and she opened the door, smiling grimly. "You're all very fortunate to be so unfamiliar with Apollyon Pringle and his trusty cane."

Theo grimaced. He stepped past her through the doorway, into the dim, wood-panelled reception room, whose furnishings were boldly bland and whose floorboards *creaked* beneath his feet. Vance strode straight ahead to the front desk, behind which hung a portrait of a wizened witch with plaited grey hair and a gold headpiece.

"Auror Emmeline Vance," she introduced herself to the elderly receptionist, whose blue spectacles hung from a string of purple beads. "I have Theodore Nott with me."

"Case number?" the receptionist asked mechanically.

As Vance reached into her robes for a slip of paper, Theo's gaze drifted to the waiting area, the only occupant of which was a balding wizard who was frowning worriedly at the *Evening Prophet*.

Many times had Theo pictured this place, wondering if he might wind up here — be it by his own will or by the will of whomever had last alluded to it. He had expected it to be more welcoming, perhaps have a chest of toys in the waiting area and a few colourful posters, or else be more hospital-like, bright and clinical, full of noise and urgency.

In all his imaginings, he had never considered that it might look so strikingly ordinary, as though nothing unusual ever occurred here.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Vance move. Wordlessly, he followed her to a pair of chairs by the front windows. The cushions were plain and hard. Outside, the sun had dipped slightly lower.

There was a magazine rack on the left, its issues mostly outdated; front and centre was the March issue of *The Quibbler* that had spread like wildfire throughout Hogwarts in the days, then weeks, and soon months, following its publication: *HARRY POTTER SPEAKS OUT AT LAST: THE TRUTH ABOUT HE-WHO-MUST-NOT-BE-NAMED AND THE NIGHT I SAW HIM RETURN.*

Theo stuffed his hands in his pockets to fidget.

“What have you there?” Vance asked after a minute.

Reluctantly, he took out Pansy’s missing earring-backing.

“Someone lost it in the common room,” he told Vance. “I meant to find out who so I could return it but … I forgot it was in my pocket.”

She hummed and went back to watching the street.

“This shouldn’t take long, Mr Nott,” she said. “Then we shall see about some supper. I expect you’re hungry.”

“A bit,” he lied. The honest answer was, *Incredibly*, but he suspected anything he ate would come right back up.

An old clock ticked loudly on the right. He listened, counting; two minutes and eleven seconds had passed (during which a girl about his age emerged from round a corner and walked out with the balding wizard’s hand on her shoulder, her eyes firmly on the ground) when a welfare wizard appeared to call out his name.

Theo and Vance stood to meet him.

The welfare wizard shook Theo’s hand and introduced himself as Rupert Jordan. He was round-cheeked, had a braided beard and thick dreadlocks that went down to his waist, and there was something comfortable about the way he smiled. Theo suspected it was intentional — an attempt to make him feel comfortable, too, as if anyone could ever be comfortable in this situation, or after perching on seats so dull.

“We’re just going to have a quick chat in my office, all right?” Mr Jordan said, much too casually. “This way.”

He had an odd way of leading; he walked alongside Theo, rather than in front, past the front desk and round the corner into a long, narrow corridor lined with doors, merely pointing to keep them on the right path as he made idle conversation about the many woes of O.W.L. examinations. Theo had to wonder if he was making a concerted effort to not seem like a professor inviting a student back to their office to discuss outstanding assignments.

Whilst Vance positioned herself to wait outside, Mr Jordan directed Theo through the eighth door on the right and into a small office, whose desk was a honey-coloured wood and whose chairs had much better cushions than those in the waiting area. A signed Tutshill Tornados poster was framed on one wall, though Theo couldn’t make out whose signature it was. He probably wouldn’t recognise the name, anyway.

“Which do you prefer — Mr Nott or Theodore?” Mr Jordan asked as he settled behind his desk.

“Just Theo, sir.”

“Theo, it is, then,” he said easily.

And then he flipped open a casefile that was much thicker than Theo thought it ought to have been.

“Now, just lend me a second here …”

Theo eyed the open box of paper kerchiefs on the desk, within suspiciously close reach.

“Aha!” exclaimed Mr Jordan suddenly. “Sorry about that, I couldn’t remember your cousin Terric’s name — it was beginning to irk me. Now, Theo —” he folded his hands atop the file, “— since you’ve about four more months before you come of age, you need someone to stay with until you go back to school in September.”

Theo nodded, because he knew this already.

“You have two options: you’ve got your godmother, Narcissa Malfoy, and — well, I’m sure a wizard like yourself is familiar with how succession works so — you’ve also got your cousin Terric. He and I have exchanged a few letters over the last couple of months, and he has agreed to stay in England for the summer, as opposed to having you pack up and move to —” Mr Jordan had to check his notes again and sound it out, “— *Bade-in-Wart-tem-berg* … No, I definitely butchered that.”

“Baden-Württemberg.”

“Is that it? Thank you. Anyway, assuming he doesn’t manage to miss his International Portkey, he’ll be arriving at the Ministry of Magic roughly an hour from now. Have you already got an idea of where you’d like to go?”

“Well —” Theo stopped, forcing himself to consider it.

He resumed toying with Pansy’s earring-backing as he imagined moving into Malfoy Manor for the summer, spending nearly every waking hour with Draco, who would hopefully no longer be a slug by the time Theo arrived in Wiltshire. It would be just the three of them — with Lucius gone and with Draco’s grandmother recently deciding, smartly, to reside with some cousin in Normandy for the time being — and Narcissa was always as happy as Theo was to let Draco fill the quiet.

But it would not be just the three of them, would it?

And lately, Draco had been filling the quiet with something other than needless chatter.

“There are benefits to both,” Mr Jordan began tentatively, when Theo had been silent for too long. “Should you choose to stay with your godmother, you’ll get to be with your godbrother, whom I’ve been given to understand is a good friend of yours. On the other hand, if it’s your cousin you should choose, you’ll get to stay in your own house … sleep in your own bed …”

He waited, watching, before saying more.

“Remember, it’s only for a couple of months — then you’ll be back at Hogwarts and come November your house will legally be your own. You could even give your cousin the boot if you wanted.”

Theo did not think it would be so simple. Although he was not certain what would await him at Nottingham Hall, he knew whatever it was, he would not be able to give it the boot.

He wondered which option his mother would have wanted him to choose. He knew that she had not liked Terric all that much, and if it truly were just Draco and Narcissa living there, she would have wanted him to go to Malfoy Manor. As this was not likely to be the case, however, Theo supposed that he might as well keep his promise to visit her remaining fern, regardless of how ridiculous it seemed now that he was old enough to understand Mr Dearborn was really nothing but a boring old houseplant.

“I’ll just stay with Terric,” he decided at last.

“Are you certain?” asked Mr Jordan patiently. “I won’t go filing any of the paperwork unless you are.”

“I’m certain, sir,” said Theo, lying straight through his teeth.

“All right, then. Terric, it is.” Mr Jordan unravelled a long scroll, plucked a quill from an inkwell on his desk, and made it official.

The next fifteen minutes were spent in a squished conference room on the floor above, waiting for Vance to return with takeaway, which turned out to be fish and chips from the Leaky Cauldron — the only place still open at this hour (of the respectable variety, that was).

She took the chair opposite Theo, right in the middle of the long oak conference table, and Conjured glinting bronze plates, cutlery, and goblets for them both.

“Not the most nutritious of meals,” she sighed, as she filled their goblets with water from the tip of her wand, “but needs must.”

She slid one goblet across the table. Theo tried not to drink too greedily, but he drained the whole thing whilst she was still chewing her first bite. Without comment, she leaned over to refill it.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Theo mumbled, and he took a small sip this time before setting the goblet aside.

He was then confronted with the food, which had not come from a wand, and which had also spent several minutes out of his sight.

He looked at Vance, wondering how much of this interference was well-intentioned. She could have put Veritaserum in his food, for all he knew, and where would that leave him, if he ate it? In the likely event that the Auror Office wanted him to spill all his secrets — or, more accurately, all his father’s — this was precisely the way to accomplish it.

It hardly helped that Pa was a positively horrific secret-keeper sometimes. All it took was an excess of boredom at the breakfast table and Theo knew about mass-murderers who had never really been mass-murderers.

He crossed his arms and stayed like that.

When it became clear that he would not be eating anything, Vance placed her cutlery on her plate. Just as she opened her mouth to speak, however, she paused. Pursing her lips, she leaned back.

“I will not bother to reassure you that the food is safe to eat,” she said, after a second. “A line like that proves nothing to you. My mother taught me as much. She warned me when I was about your age, I think, to never accept any food or beverage from a stranger. I am not exactly a stranger, of course, but the point stands, nonetheless. To be alone with anyone whom you’ve no substantial reason to trust — and furthermore, to be without a usable wand …”

Theo wondered where she was going with this.

“You are wise not to touch anything I offer you. I hope that wisdom extends beyond merely myself. Tell me, were you also warned by your mother?”

Since he could not deduce what answer she was digging for, only that she was, in fact, digging for one, he gave her no answer at all.

Once more, Vance sighed.

“Very well, Mr Nott,” she said shortly. “Allow me to level with you for a moment.”

He truly wished she would not.

“How much do you know about the first time your father was arrested?” she asked without preamble.

“He was accused of being a Death Eater,” said Theo. “That much I know.”

Vance nodded as though she had expected him to say exactly this. Her question had been posed solely to prove a point, it seemed, and this set him further on edge.

“No one ever told you what else he was arrested for?”

He hesitated for a long moment, willing himself not to answer this time, but his curiosity ultimately overpowered his concerns. He shook his head.

“Kidnapping,” she told him bluntly. “And he was accused by no less than five people, very few of whom had any lingering connection to each other whatsoever. Yet, despite their lack of connection, within just over a week of You-Know-Who being gone, they had all filed the same report. According to them, your father had been holding someone hostage for — oh, what would it have been — roughly three and a half years, at that point? Remind me, when were your parents married?”

A tingling chill washed down Theo's face, and he thought perhaps this was the sensation of the blood draining from it. It must have been, because Vance clearly saw something on his face, or else a lack thereof equally telling.

"You know what I'm getting at, don't you, Mr Nott?"

He shook his head again, because *know* was the wrong word.

"I was brought on to the case to conduct an interview with the victim," she went on, pushing her plate away and folding her arms atop the table. "For cases like these, you see, it is best to have a female Auror asking the questions. I should think you are old enough by now to understand why that it is."

The bile rising in his throat said that he was indeed old enough, but he swallowed it back down and said nothing himself.

"Merlin knows you were not old enough then. I remember it quite distinctly: how small you were. I thought the same thing the next time I saw you, all those years later … when I watched Auror Shacklebolt carry you in … how small you looked in his arms … And I remember, I then thought, 'She would have been better off had she been a worse liar.'"

Vance's voice had grown thick. She took a moment to sip her water and collect herself before resuming.

"I could tell when I questioned her that there was at least a grain of truth to the accusations. The way she behaved, though, it was not the result of one isolated incident or a single terrible night. I could tell that someone had hurt her, but more than this, someone had *been* hurting her …"

Theo racked his brain for something less drastic to do than throw his chips at her face to get her to stop talking about this.

"She spoke highly of your father but not *too* highly. It felt natural. I'd thought … well … I'd thought perhaps he had not been entirely forthright with her, especially where his allegiances were concerned, but I had not thought he was the one who had been hurting her. At the time, I'd believed him guilty only of not stopping it."

It was unnerving, how grimly she regarded him.

"Do you know why those five people filed their reports?" she asked, and then she answered the question herself. "Because your mother was as good a person as she was a liar. And she had friends. Friends who wished to help her. Friends who — should you only ask — would wish to help you, too." Eyeing him closely still, she added, "So, Theo … are you going to ask?"

All of a sudden, Theo realised that Emmeline Vance did not work solely for the Auror Office.

Interference, indeed, he thought ruefully.

With this third option now on the table, it was obvious what his mother would have wanted him to choose. But Ma was not here.

“Would one of these friends happen to be Professor Remus Lupin?” he asked finally.

One of Vance’s eyebrows rose ever so slightly.

“Now what would make you say that?”

“I knew of — er — *one* of my mother’s friends … Not his name or anything else about him, just that he was … very dear to her,” said Theo, with difficulty. He forced himself to swallow. “I’ve since sorted out the rest. As you said, I’m old enough now to understand what I couldn’t then … to understand what was meant by … ‘very dear.’”

“I see,” said Vance, at length.

And so did Theo, who had been hoping for some subtextual form of denial, or at least a response far less ambiguous.

“He was a brilliant professor,” he offered quietly, and it was an apology, to her and to Professor Lupin, to whom he hoped she would pass it on. “The best I’ve had, probably. I believe my mother would’ve thought the same.”

“I believe you’re right about that,” said Vance, her voice thick again. She gestured at him reluctantly. “Let’s hear the ‘but,’ then.”

“*But* … I have nothing to ask you, Auror Vance.”

She looked disappointed in him. Although it smarted, particularly once paired with her pitying looks as they left Diagon Alley a short while later, no amount of convincing would change Theo’s mind about this.

Azkaban Prison was not inescapable.

The drive to Nottingham Hall was long and dark. This time, however, Vance did fill the silence; she pestered him with question after question, each one as seemingly insignificant as the last.

Unable to see the harm in it, Theo told her that his favourite class was History of Magic, because sometimes he really needed that nap (at this, she laughed); his latest favourite book was *Alchemy, Ancient Art and Science* by Argo Pyrites (which, privately, he felt guilty about because according to Pa, Ma had loathed it); his favourite song was *Beat Back Those Bludgers, Boys, and Chuck That Quaffle Here* by Celestina Warbeck, since it made Draco and Daphne both go slightly mad in contrasting ways that were most entertaining when they were in the same room (Vance shook her head in exasperation); he didn’t follow Quidditch, but his favourite team was the Chudley Cannons since it had been his mother’s and was consequently the first one he had known (her eyes got sad); and his owl’s name was Paddington, after a fictional bear his mother had told him stories about.

“Those are Muggle stories,” said Vance softly, meeting his gaze in the rear-view mirror. “Paddington the Bear.”

“Truly?”

She nodded.

Theo felt himself frown, which was odd, because he was not all that surprised, really. In fact, he was a little amused. Ma had told those stories right in front of Pa, and now it made sense why she had sometimes been smirking.

“You’re quite like her, you know,” Vance told him abruptly, her eyes back on the road. “She, too, is — pardon me, was — very bright. An eager listener, with great attention to detail — *inquisitive*, I believe is the word I’m looking for; she liked to ask questions. You are quieter, though, to be sure. She never could stay silent for long.”

“Well, that I inherited from my father,” said Theo wryly.

“Of all the traits you could have inherited from that man, Theo, *quiet* is far from a bad one.”

Just then, Nottingham Hall came into view, all lit up in the distance; a sure sign that more than a single someone was home. There remained roughly fifty yards separating them from the front gates when Vance slowed the car and turned off the headlights.

“I can keep driving,” she said. “All you need do is ask.”

Theo was quiet. Sighing, she pulled over.

“Shall I walk you in?”

“Best you don’t,” he said transparently.

“In that case, Theo …” Vance twisted in her seat to look at him properly, her expression grimmer than it had been all evening. “*Stay* quiet, do you hear? Keep your head down. And if you ever *do* want to ask, there’s an office occupied by everyone who once held it that you can go to, and a certain *mad* friend of mine who is also open to answering.”

Theo still had no intention of ever asking for this help. Nevertheless, he nodded his head so Vance could feel like she had made a difference, however slight.

Steeling himself, he climbed out of the car to retrieve his trunk and Paddington’s cage from the boot. Without looking back, he started towards his home, and the people who had taken over it.

Dinky was there to greet him, at least, even if it was with relieved sigh and a strained smile. They did away with his belongings with a snap of their fingers, informed him that Paddington had arrived safely and was resting in the owlery, and then demanded to know if he had eaten supper. Theo was no longer hungry, so he complained about how greasy the fish and chips had been. Once they were done listing all the vegetables that they were going to feed him that

summer, whether he liked it or not, he asked, “Has Terric moved himself into the master bedroom yet?”

“Oh, no, no, no, Master, not on Dinky’s watch,” said Dinky, looking mutinous over the idea that Terric could have the audacity to do such a thing. “Master Terric and Mistress Harolyn was taking one of the guest rooms — the deer room, Master.”

“You mean they chose to sleep surrounded by taxidermy rather than be in the family apartments?” said Theo, nonplussed.

“But those rooms is being reserved, Master.”

“For who?”

“*Master Theo*,” they started admonishingly, putting their hands on their hips, “you *knows* Mistress Mione was always telling yous —”

“For *whom*?” he corrected himself impatiently.

“For guests who is not returned yet — *stuck*, they is, in the no-good place that was giving Master Tavaris and Mistress Mione chills for days after *one* visit!” said Dinky significantly, holding up one finger for emphasis. Before Theo could inquire as to what visit they were referring to, they rushed on. “So cold, the no-good place — so very cold, Master — so rooms is kept ready and warm for when the Dark Lord brings little Mulciber and littlest Lestrange back again.”

Now Theo had a more pressing inquiry.

“Is anyone else currently staying here?”

“No, Master,” they said, luckily. In an undertone, they added meaningfully, “The Dark Lord is being at Malfoy Manor now.”

Theo had chosen at least somewhat correctly, then. Even so, he felt ill as he climbed the stairs to the family apartments. He turned first into the master parlour to say hello to his grandparents’ portraits so someone could ask him how his O.W.L. examinations had gone (excellently apart from History of Magic, in which he had gotten distracted from his wildly creative bullshitting on the Goblin Wars by Harry Potter’s inconveniently-timed collapse), then crossed the landing to the heir’s bedroom.

The gas lamps had been lit in hopeful preparation for his potential return, the linen bedsheets changed and crisply tucked, the pillows plumped, the grate of the ornate fireplace swept and scrubbed of soot — all within sight neatly kept to the best of Dinky’s ability. The 1995 calendar that had hung on one wall — damaging the hundred-something-year-old wallpaper depicting a dark, leafless wood — had been replaced with one for 1996, and it even had the correct days crossed off, waiting now on June the thirtieth, which Dinky had circled in thick, blue ink: the day Theo came home.

Awaiting him at the foot of the four-poster was his trunk; on the desk, an orderly stack of newspapers, consistently collected from the lord's study after they had been read so he could peruse the cartoons; and on one of the claw-footed bedside tables, a gleaming silver goblet and a fresh jug of water.

Theo bothered with none of it. He kicked the door shut and flung himself face-first onto his bed.

Only then did he let himself wonder, as he traced the entwining white thread decorating the green bedspread, what it meant that his mother had possessed so many friends in the Order of the Phoenix. The word *kidnapped* repeated itself in his head, and it made the very worst of him rear its head, until it took all he had to not hurl or pummel anything besides his pillows.

Theo hoped fervently that the Dark Lord would leave Pa to rot in that cell for the rest of the summer.

*

It was the next day after a breakfast so late it probably did not count as one that Theo saw his cousin. Rather than stray too far from the family apartments, he climbed through the portrait hole in the morning room to reach the map room just off the library; when he slipped out from behind the tapestry of Ingolfr the Iambic being swarmed by Golden Snidgets in revenge for his satirical poetry on the other side, he found Terric sitting at the large table with the outdated world map painted on it — outdated, as in it was missing an entire hemisphere.

It had been quite some time since Theo had laid eyes on any of his cousins, but Terric had a distinct look about him. Although he possessed the same dark hair, narrow frame, and slightly sallow skin as most of their family, his face gave the impression of poorly moulded clay, forging features all slightly disproportionate, and currently, drawn tight in focus as he pored over a letter. Other letters lay scattered before him, along with scrolls and documents that had *E.P.T.D.* printed officially at the top.

"Theodore!" he exclaimed in surprise upon spotting him. He gave Theo a onceover and sniggered. "Finally, you grow taller."

"I've a few inches to go still, I suspect," said Theo, moving further into the room. "It's nearly every day I wake up to find the beds in the dormitory have gotten just a *teensy* bit lower."

He set *Alchemy, Ancient Art and Science* down on the table and, in a calculated move, hopped up to sit on the surface. He received no admonishment for it, confirming that Terric was not someone around whom Theo would have to be his most well-mannered self.

Thank fuck, he thought. It would have really irked if he had to go the whole summer without putting his feet up on the sofa. Whenever his great-great-aunt Adalaide decided upon one of her spontaneous visits (welfare checks, really, but no one said that aloud), she made him wear shoes in his own house at all times.

"You find witch at school who likes you enough to tailor your trousers, ja?" Terric asked, leaning back with a grin.

“No, but I’ve a witch who hates the sight of my socks enough to send out my measurements for some new pairs.” Theo lifted one leg of his trousers to draw attention to one such sock, which was fluorescent-purple and had stars all over it. “My friend Daphne claims they offend her eyes.”

It was out of pity, truthfully, but Daphne’s excuses were much funnier: “You could at least *look* like you have dignity,” she would say when she noticed his floods, or, as she wrote to Twilfitt and Tattings pretending to be him and asked that the balance be added to his tab, “I’m merely practicing my forgery.”

She could do his signature better than he could now.

Terric sniggered again, then, noticing Theo’s book, peered curiously at the cover.

“Alchemy!” he burst out, his whole face lighting up. “Sonderinteresse?”

“Er …”

“Your interest,” he clarified impatiently.

Theo shrugged, which was an understatement in and of itself.

“I like it.”

Terric nodded his head rapidly.

“My area of study,” he said with enthusiasm, sitting forward. “I was asked to teach at Durmstrang, but your papa so stupid — is arrested — now I must decline. Nicholas Flamel, you must know, ja? I was ‘is apprentice.”

“Truly?” said Theo, with a quickness that betrayed his interest.

“Ja, ja. Long time ago. I am retaining *no French*!” Terric gestured to the letter he had been reading, looking suddenly aggrieved. “Your cousin Delany too much like ‘is papa; when ‘e writes, ‘e does not care — all French. No German? OK, I live. But *English*!”

He huffed in annoyance, sitting back once more.

“You know French, Theodore?” he asked, after a moment.

“I can read it better than I can speak it.”

“My English same,” Terric told him, commiserating. “And now I must write English always! Everyone so eager to be learning French, but German? *Ach*.”

“You can blame the Norman Invasion for that. But on the brightside, when you die,” said Theo blithely, “you’ll be able to lodge a formal complaint to William the Conqueror.”

That got a snort. Pointing to the letter, Terric said, “You read, then you translate.”

Theo picked it up. The letter had been written in flowing, flowery French; as though writing in a language Terric scarcely knew were not enough, Delany had peppered the whole thing with words and phrases both unnecessary and unnecessarily long. Working to keep the amusement from his voice, Theo began to convey the message.

"He's writing from Egypt."

"Ja, 'e studies zere," Terric dismissed. "Ancient Runes."

"Right. Well, he keeps encountering people from Gringotts," Theo continued, scanning the letter. "He complains that the contents of the temples keep being *excavated*, I assume, before he has the chance to see anything himself … waffles on a bit about the unpleasant disposition of the goblins … how the English Curse-Breakers never smile … er … I don't know this word but I think he's saying they're *allergic* to flavour? Oh, there is a Curse-Breaker he likes, though. But it seems he returned to England last year to take a desk job — in June."

Terric made a noise of understanding. Bemused, Theo kept reading, searching for some clue as to what could be notable about lamenting the loss of one's favourite Englishman.

"Even the goblins were surprised when this bloke left, Delany says. No one had him pinned as someone who'd ever … er … wear the costume of a businessman, I think … He goes on to express his shock over what happened with my father … asks if I'll be testifying at his trial — which I won't be — and … that's pretty much it."

He looked back up at Terric, who had grabbed a notepad and was now scribbling something on it.

"What is it?"

"Last *June*, Order of zee Phoenix was reformed. Zis Curse-Breaker," said Terric, putting the quill down, "if last *June*, 'e goes 'ome all of sudden to England, now we know — Dumbledore's man."

He tapped the notepad, on which, messily, he had scrawled the name, *William Weasley.*

"On watchlist now."

Hope he's sneaky, thought Theo, grimacing. He put the letter down. Although he suspected he already knew the answer, he asked, "Just how many Weasleys are on this list?"

"Ach, 'ow many *Wees—lays*! You want me to *count*?" Terric groaned loudly. "From zis branch, now almost whole family. Reminds me, you must visit joke shop."

"I take it Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes has gotten its own premises?" Briefly, Theo wondered how it had been afforded.

Terric nodded.

"You go, you take look, you report back. Easy."

“No, thanks.”

He was taken aback.

“You will not see joke shop? Even for fun?”

“No,” Theo repeated definitively.

“OK,” said Terric, easily enough, though he appeared mystified. “We send Malfoy boy. Now, different business —” he referenced another page of his notepad, “— you are friend of son of Madam Zabini — *Blees—eh* — ja?”

Theo sat up straighter.

“I mean, we share a dormitory,” he said, apprehensive. “Why?”

“Just question,” said Terric evasively, as he retrieved a long, black smoking pipe from his robes. He reached for the silver snuffbox on a nearby side-table. “Madam Zabini — she is witch whose ‘usbands keep dying, ja?”

“Yes, rotten luck, that,” said Theo flippantly, as Terric began packing the bowl of his pipe. “But what has this got to do with us?”

“She ‘as caused small offense. Not important.”

“Well, he *is* a friend,” said Theo, more assertively. “A close friend, actually.”

Terric grunted distractedly.

“What I wanted to know. If your friend, no ‘arm comes to ‘im. You do not worry, Theodore.”

He drew his wand to light the end of his pipe, his cheeks hollowing, and leaned back with a long, gladdened sigh on which hung a sweet-smelling cloud of purplish smoke. Absently, Theo decided he would have to find out later precisely what plant had been put in that snuffbox, because it was most definitely not tobacco.

“You ‘ave ozzer friend,” Terric continued eventually, gazing at Theo inquiringly and drawing him from his speculations over whether this plant could get him high or not. “A Parkinson girl.”

Theo stiffened again.

“Pure blood. Good blood. Good girl. We invite to dinner.”

“Why?” he asked suspiciously.

The map room had grown hazy, and it grew hazier still as Terric kept puffing on his pipe.

“We are ‘osting tonight,” he informed Theo, in a thick voice, shifting into a comfortable slouch. “Board of Potions Association. You ‘ave date, you are not bored. Also, she is

granddaughter of Governor, so perfect date."

Theo relaxed slightly.

Terric checked the time on his silver wristwatch and wrinkled his nose, as if displeased to discover another hour until this dinner had slipped away from him.

"If you need snack, 'Arolyn 'as elf put almonds out."

Theo took tea in the conservatory instead, after walking as sedately as he could to the owlery to send a letter off with Paddington to deliver to Blaise, asking after his mother and mentioning, oh so casually, that he had heard Italy was nice this time of year.

As he picked at the offerings on the tea tray, he continued reading his book, though he did not manage to get very far. Try as he might, he could not force himself to focus on the words, not with his mind occupied elsewhere.

At the very least, he managed to fulfil his duty to his mother.

"Lovely weather we're having," he said, as a *CLAP* of thunder sounded in the distance. "Perfect day for a stroll, wouldn't you say?"

The fern, being a fern, did not reply.

"Great chatting to you as always, Mr Dearborn."

Just then, the doors to the lounge opened. Theo popped a lemon macaroon in his mouth and pretended he had not just been talking to a houseplant. The last thing he needed was for Harolyn to think he had gone round the bend.

Only it was not Harolyn Nott who entered.

If Theo had a Knut for every time a Lestrange had interrupted his afternoon tea, he would have enough to buy — something, surely. A Liquorice Wand? Anyway, it was odd that it was happening twice.

She approached as comfortably as the last two had, as though she, too, had been there before, and now Theo knew to expect that she had known him before as well.

"Theodore, at last," said Bellatrix Lestrange, with an ever-widening, tooth-rotted grin. "I have been looking all over for you."

She had a leering way about her; a posture which reminded him of a cat about to pounce. He waited tensely, wondering if he was about to have his hair ruffled again. A second later, he was proved correct.

"Not so little anymore, are you?" she said, in a lightly teasing tone of voice. She twirled a lock of his hair round her taloned finger. "If I saw you on the street, I might not even know it was you."

“I can’t say the same,” said Theo uncomfortably.

Bellatrix let out a laugh, high and ringing, her eyebrows rising in surprise, as though she had not expected him to make light of the fact that her wanted posters were persistently plastered all over the place. Evidently, she could not have known him very well.

“It is not my best picture, I admit,” she said amusedly, slipping away, “but you cannot deny, *Undesirable Number Two* does have a certain ring to it … a mark of achievement, if you will …”

She draped herself across the chair opposite him. Idly, she picked up a blueberry scone, then dropped it back on the tray with a disinterested sniff.

“I was forbidden from coming here, you know,” she whispered abruptly, shooting him a conspiratorial look. “Too many *important people* could be wandering about, what with your family’s business, and it would not do to be noticed … I would loathe to join Nott in Azkaban … But I simply had to see you for myself — and look at you, *ickle Theodore*, almost all grown!”

Her dark, heavily-lidded eyes held an eery gleam.

“As always, the Dark Lord was right; you do *so* resemble your dear late mother.”

Theo gave her a tight-lipped smile; the muscles of his face felt strained from it.

“I usually hear the opposite — that I resemble my father.”

“No,” said Bellatrix instantly, with a dismissive flick of her fingers. “No, you have Nott’s eyes. The Dark Lord told me you have *her* nose, though — and her hair, though I do not see much similarity there, personally — but I, of course, was not so fortunate as to spend as much time with your mother as the Dark Lord did, so how should I know what shade of brown her hair was when it caught the light?”

Suddenly, she stood.

“He left this to her, you know,” she told Theo, brushing her knuckles against a leaf of the fern; he could have sworn he saw it shudder. “It was meant to go to someone else, but the Dark Lord knew how much it meant to your mother. By the end of their sadly short time together, he tells me he knew her better than anyone alive — or dead.”

She said little else before she left, seemingly satisfied to leave it at this. In her wake, she left Theo’s cheek tingling from a kiss and his brain spinning with a bout of confusion greater than any he had ever experienced. Because honestly —

What the fuck?

That his mother had had friends in the Order was confounding enough, but now this? Theo did not know what to make of it. He had hardly any time to ponder it, either, for all too soon he had to return upstairs to, sadly, dress for dinner.

For as long as Theo could remember, his father had run the European Potions Trade and Distribution Company, so when he greeted the Board of Governors of the Potions Association that evening, he received several more remarks relating to his recent growth spurt — plus several less-endearing others regarding his father's arrest.

"Such a hideous example he has set for you as a father," said Brunhilde Stokke, who had too-purple hair and too much personality.

"It's despicable, what he's done," said Pius Thicknesse, in a clear, sturdy voice. His extensive forehead had gained several new lines since Theo had last seen him, and his trailing beard, several more silver streaks. "Perhaps it may be argued that power corrupts, but in his power, he was the corruption itself."

"Quite," said Mrs Thicknesse succinctly, and then she started calling Theo "you poor dear" and patting his head.

Suffice it to say that Theo was more than a little relieved when Pansy arrived with her grandparents.

"Granddaddy threw a fit before we left," she whispered to him during drinks, as all around them, the adults were talking — thankfully, just to each other. "He almost didn't come tonight, he was in such a rage, and he even tried to stop me going through the Floo, can you imagine?"

Theo eyed Paulus Parkinson's frigid stance from across the lounge; the grip he had on his tumbler was so tight that Theo half-expected it to shatter. Privately, he hoped that it did; that would be a laugh — for him and probably no one else, but a laugh for him was the best sort of laugh, in his opinion.

"Between you and me," Pansy continued puckishly, "I think he just loathes being the plus-one. Really, he nearly bursts a blood vessel whenever Grandmother joins a new board, though to be fair, she does tend to collect them. I think she's on the one for St Mungo's Hospital now."

As she and Theo watched, Edolie Parkinson — dressed in dazzling midnight robes and glittery star-spangled gloves — introduced him ("And you know my husband, of course.") to Griselda Marchbanks, a wizened witch who carried herself in a stately manner and who also served as Governor of the Wizarding Examinations Authority and may or may not have already known Theo's and Pansy's O.W.L. results.

"Do you suppose if we were to ask her, she would tell us whether we passed or not?" Theo asked Pansy in an undertone.

"She seems awfully stiff, don't you think?" she replied shrewdly, narrowing her eyes at Madam Marchbanks, who was now shaking Mr Parkinson's hand. "Perhaps after dinner, once she's had a few." She looked at Theo again and added, whispering still, "Have you heard from Draco?"

“Blimey, Pansy, we’ve barely been back twenty-four hours,” he muttered, in exasperation. “What do you suppose he and I are — conjoined twins? I’ll have you know a bunch of crackpot Muggle Healers surgically removed him from my left hip *years* ago.”

“I’m worried about him, Theo,” said Pansy tartly. “In case you’ve forgotten, his father is currently in *Azkaban*.”

“So is mine,” Theo pointed out.

“Well, that’s different, isn’t it, Draco adores his father.”

He conceded with a nod.

Before Pansy could make any more inquiries concerning Draco’s overall well-being, they were approached by Mr Thicknesse and Tiberius Ogden, the latter of whom was, contrarily, not drinking Ogden’s Old Firewhiskey, but brandy.

“Now, Theodore, we require your frank opinion,” Mr Ogden said quietly, with a solemn expression. “What do you make of your cousin?”

“I don’t know him that well, to be honest, sir,” said Theo truthfully. “I mean, I haven’t seen him since I was a kid.”

“But do you believe he will do well in this position?” Mr Thicknesse pressed. “Because we at the Potions Association — and furthermore, we at the Ministry — are not interested in the current instability of British wizarding affairs reaching the potions trade. We suffered a scarcity of resources last time — a scarcity which seemed to magically resolve itself within a few months of the war ending, and which we now have reason to believe your father and possibly even your cousin Theomund were behind.”

Theo wondered how one was meant to respond to a statement like this. *Sorry about that?*

“Well, one of my cousins studies Ancient Runes,” he said, after a moment, “another is a magical historian, and one is a Magizoologist, so I think Terric is probably the best option for taking over the company. At least he’s an alchemist.”

Mr Ogden nodded and took a large sip of his brandy.

“Does he have the diplomacy skills for it?” asked Mr Thicknesse. “A significant part of this role relies upon the maintaining of positive international relations.”

Theo thought of all the times he had heard Terric shout “Froschfresser” across the table at his cousin Barnett and winced.

“How important would you say our relationship is with France?” he inquired hesitantly.

Thankfully, Harolyn Nott chose that moment to announce that dinner had been served, so Mr Thicknesse only had time to say, “We shall continue this conversation later,” before he and Mr Ogden went to offer their arms to their respective wives. Pansy elbowed Theo in the ribs to remind him that he was supposed to do the same.

"*I* heard Mr Ogden and Madam Marchbanks resigned from the Wizengamot last year in protest of Dumbledore's removal as Chief Warlock," she murmured to him as they followed the party across the Great Hall to the formal dining room.

"I thought it was in protest of Umbridge being appointed High Inquisitor," said Theo, with a frown.

"Well, the two events are not exactly unrelated, are they?"

She made a good point. Although few of her points often were, it could not be denied that Pansy knew people; when it came to people, she could connect dots quicker than Theo could. He had a passing thought that he ought to tell her this, for he knew she liked compliments more than the average person, but then they were taking their seats and had to answer questions about how school was going instead. Pansy got them out of it by cleverly pointing out that such mark-related questions should be directed at Madam Marchbanks, which earned a few laughs but sadly no hints about their O.W.L. results.

It was halfway through the main course — a suspiciously spiced-looking roast pork with prunes — that the elephant in the room was addressed.

"I wish I am able to ask Tavi — Tavaris — but, you know, no post in Azkaban," Terric told Madam Stokke apologetically. "I did not grow up 'ere so I cannot give you answer."

He turned to Theo and pointed.

"Theodore, you know where zis elephant comes from?"

Theo peered at the bejewelled statuary on the side-table.

"Oh, that," he said. "It's fairly new, actually. I believe my great-grandfather Torsten picked it up in India, whenever it joined the Commonwealth."

"That was in 'forty-seven," Madam Marchbanks informed him, smiling archly.

"Oh. It was probably someone else who picked it up, then," said Theo. "My great-grandfather wasn't up for much travelling that year."

"Too dead," explained Terric helpfully.

Finally, whilst the adults were still indulging in an array of desserts — from sugar-topped rosettes to something called quark balls to a cake named, frighteningly, bee sting — Pansy gave her grandfather an imploring look and Theo made eye-contact with Harolyn and gestured covertly to the exit. The former failed, but the latter succeeded, so Pansy pretended to have missed her grandfather's head-shaking and joined Theo in excusing himself from the table. The pair left to a chorus of praise for their patience in resisting escape for a full four courses.

The second they got through the door, they shared a look — a silent agreement on a proposed course of action — and took off running down the corridor, past the informal dining room, and veering left toward the Floo room, outside of which they paused before the portrait of

Morwenna Nott. Hastily, Theo whispered, "*Alwin the Second was a cunt in life and he's a cunt in death*," which Morwenna accepted happily as the correct password; the portrait swung forward, and he ushered Pansy through before climbing in himself.

"It's times like these when I do sorely wish I was an orphan," Pansy said breathlessly, as the two of them hurried down the cramped spiral stairwell lined with torches that flared to life as they passed. "Is it as terribly convenient as it seems?"

"Well, I'm only a temporary orphan," Theo replied, as they neared the basement, "but thus far I have been enjoying the perks — it's the second door on the right. *Don't* open the first one; the duelling room is slightly booby-trapped."

He was jumping off the third-last step when Pansy yanked the old oak door open with both hands, its hinges groaning in protest, and into the cellar the pair eagerly went.

Theo grinned in triumph as he let his gaze rove over the towering, dust-laden racks that encircled them. Pansy pulled a bottle off a shelf and spun to face him, showing it off.

"May I interest you in a bottle of Beau Champagne from nineteen-twenty-three, sir?" she said, affecting an accent only slightly snootier than her own. Smirking, she added in a hushed voice, "*It was a good year*."

Whatever the year, it was undoubtedly better than this one.

Quite fitting, Theo thought to himself a while later, as they sat on the cool marble deck of the natatorium, *drinking warm champagne.* A celebratory drink, only all there was to celebrate was overshadowed by all there was unworthy of celebration.

He took a swig, some of it dribbling down his chin, and passed the bottle back to Pansy, who was perched rather like a mermaid beside him. The reflection of the weak candlelight on the clear, rippling water cast a sheen over the satin of her pale pink dress.

It's rude to stare, he reminded himself.

"Isn't it strange?" she said suddenly, gazing at him sideways. "They say we're at war, but it doesn't feel like war. For the most part, everything has stayed the same."

"For you, maybe," muttered Theo, swinging his feet idly through the water. His shoes and socks lay discarded a metre away, along with his outer robes.

"Yes, yes, I know, there are real orphans out there in the world, poor Potter and all that rot."

She rolled her eyes and brought the bottle to her lips for another swig. She swallowed, an uncharacteristically pensive expression coming over her face.

"It's only that I'd always imagined there would be more … oh, you know … violence."

"Wait," said Theo darkly.

Pansy glanced at him again.

“You really haven’t heard from Draco?”

He shook his head.

She made a small, unhappy noise and looked away, biting her lip anxiously.

In that moment, Theo thought strongly that Draco did not deserve her, in whatever capacity he currently had her, because he knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that Draco did not worry about Pansy the way she was worrying about him.

“He must miss his father terribly,” she went on fretfully. “And, oh, poor Mrs Malfoy, how must *she* be feeling? But I suppose at least she has —” she hesitated, her eyes darting to the doors to the conservatory, and dropped her voice, “— *at least she has her sister for company* … right?”

Theo shrugged, shifting his weight. He took the bottle back.

“Do you imagine *he’s* there?” Pansy asked, in barely a whisper. “At the manor with Draco.”

“Well, he’s not here.”

She sighed listlessly, leaning back on her hand. She was very good at looking bored.

“She won’t ever say, of course, but I’ve begun to suspect that my mother knew him back when she was our age,” she revealed, unprompted. “My grandfather on the Avery side — you know, the one who’s dead? Daphne told me he was mentioned in the *Prophet* last week in an article about Uncle Gaspar’s upcoming trial, and it said that he was a Death Eater as well. That one-eyed, one-legged freak did him in.”

“Do you mean Mad-Eye Moody?” asked Theo.

“Yes, I mean Mad-Eye Moody, how many other one-eyed, one-legged wizards do you know, Theo?”

“A few, actually.”

She arched a thin eyebrow.

“Seriously?”

“No, I was lying,” he said blandly. “But anyway, if it makes you feel any better, my father told me that Moody’s only one-legged *because* he killed your grandfather.”

Pansy’s other eyebrow joined the first.

“Is there meant to be more to that sentence?”

He paused to consider, frowning.

“An explanation, perhaps …”

"*Right*. Yes," he said, nodding. "An old mate of your grandfather's tried to avenge him — he was aiming for Moody's neck, apparently, but evidence suggests that he might have missed."

"You don't say?" she said dryly.

"It's still a subject of debate among historians."

Pansy scoffed in what was hopefully the fond sort of exasperation. She then flung herself to the floor in one of her highly impassioned displays of listlessness, though she nearly toppled into the pool in the process and pretended valiantly to not have caught herself at the last second.

"Merlin, there's never anything to *do* here!"

Theo kicked some pool water at her; she yelped.

"I know," he agreed heavily. And then, in an afterthought, he added, "Have you any interest in smoking an unknown plant?"

She propped herself up on her elbows and narrowed her eyes.

"That depends," she said calculatingly. "Is it unknown to you or just to me?"

"I mean, *someone* knows what it is. And he went and hosted a dinner party after so …" He trailed off purposefully.

Pansy shrugged one shoulder and held out a hand.

"Well, all right, help me up, then."

It was as stealthily as they could and so not very stealthily at all that the pair crept back through conservatory, through the lounge, and down the side of the Great Hall to reach the staircase without being spotted. Thankfully, everyone still at the dinner table was preoccupied with listening to Mr Ogden regale his last Nogtail-hunting expedition with Head Auror Rufus Scrimgeour.

Theo held Pansy's hand very tightly on the stairs. After successfully retrieving the snuffbox Terric had taken out earlier that day from the map room, Theo led her stumbling through the hidden passageway to the morning room; from there, they carried on into the hall, at which point she got distracted by a mirror and stopped to inspect her reflection.

"Pansy," he said, one foot already on the stairs. He watched in disbelief as she withdrew a lipstick from the front of her dress and began doing touch-ups. "I'll just meet you upstairs, shall I?"

And he continued up the steps towards his bedroom. He got no further than the turn of the first landing, however, before he was forced to come to an abrupt halt.

"Pansy?" he called out.

"*Give me a bloody minute, Theo*!"

"No, take your time!" he said hastily, gulping down the bile in his throat. "I feel quite ill all of a sudden. Got the spins, you know."

He could just make out her noise of disgust.

"Shoo, then, go be sick! I'll wait."

He took a deep breath but did not move, not daring to break the beady, yellow gaze of the great, green-scaled serpent currently curled at the top of the stairs.

Nagini.

Pansy must have been listening for his footfalls, because he heard her snort and then yell, "Fucking hell, Theo, do you need me to stick my fingers down your throat? Go vomit already!"

Theo took another deep breath, then very slowly made a move as if to step forward. Nagini did not react, but a second later, she uncoiled herself and turned, just as slowly, to slither down the landing and into the master parlour.

Theo had no time to feel relieved, because the next second, he noticed that the door to his bedroom was ajar.

He took the last few steps and approached it cautiously. He stopped at the threshold.

"It is about time, Theodore."

A sobering sentence to hear in that high, cold voice. Even more sobering was the sight that accompanied it.

The Dark Lord was standing before the chest of drawers and peering into the old wooden jewellery box that rested on its smooth alabaster surface.

"Do not worry. Miss Parkinson cannot hear us."

From the doorway, Theo watched him reach into the jewellery box and withdraw a pair of black shoelaces which had vanished mysteriously from Marcus Flint's school shoes two years prior.

"You are quite the collector," the Dark Lord remarked. He seemed inexplicably entertained by this.

The shoelaces were exchanged for a puzzle piece which depicted a single leaf of Bran the Bloodthirsty's beanstalk.

"Tell me, would you not consider this cruel? After all, no one will ever be able to complete the whole picture because of you."

And Theo must not have been as sober as he felt, because he replied honestly, “It amuses me.”

The Dark Lord gave a short hum and dropped the puzzle piece back in the box. He then shut it, and finally, turned to face him.

“Do you know what *I* find amusing?”

Theo waited, holding the snuffbox in one hand and his sock-stuffed shoes in the other. His still-wet feet were getting cold.

“The circumstances which led to your father’s arrest,” said the Dark Lord, his voice dipping low and his words gliding smoothly off his tongue. “The Aurors had to dig him out from under a collapsed shelf in the Hall of Prophecy, where he had been left unconscious, struck down by a simple Stunning Spell … He had managed to grab hold of our slippery friend, you see — Harry Potter — and one of Potter’s little companions did not take kindly to this. She is … protective, to say the least …”

“She?” said Theo curiously.

“The Mudblood: Hermione Granger.”

He understood the amusement; being taking out of the fight by a Muggle-born, and on top of this, one who was a sixteen-year-old girl, must have had some detrimental effects on Pa’s ego.

From what Theo had heard from Vince, she had also Stunned his father, who had apparently proceeded to fall into the wrong artefact, wound up with the head of a baby, and somehow, in the process, disbalanced a cabinet of Time-Turners, resulting in the destruction of the Ministry of Magic’s entire stock, so at least Pa had someone with whom to commiserate over his embarrassment.

Theo fantasised briefly about sending Granger flowers.

The Dark Lord was smirking, pleased. When he approached the doorway, Theo moved to let him pass. He continued across the landing, adding airily as he did, “Come, Theodore.”

So Theo put his things down and came.

Through the master parlour, he followed the Dark Lord — obeying his grandmother’s portrait’s silent signal to fix his posture — and then into the master bedroom. He didn’t expect to be led through the wardrobe passageway of all things, but then again, his brain was moving too sluggishly for him to expect much of anything. He took care to mind his step as he climbed out the back of the wardrobe and down into the dressing room.

It was before a blank stretch of panelled-wall in the far-right corner that the Dark Lord stopped.

“I require a hand from you now,” he said, drawing his wand. “You may pick which one.”

Theo's eyes flitted from the wand to the blank wall.

"There's another passage, isn't there?" he said, proud of himself for cottoning on. "And Nott blood is necessary to gain entry."

"A worthy guess, but ultimately, an incorrect one. It is your mother's blood — and as it so happens," the Dark Lord said, his eyes gleaming, "*that* is the blood that runs through *your* veins, Theodore."

There was a joke in there somewhere, but Theo couldn't find it.

He tried not to approach too timidly. Upon reaching the Dark Lord's side, he held out his right hand — of which he was not so proud because that was the one that he needed most — and braced himself for the sting. Then, without being told, he dragged his palm across the wall; his blood seeped into the wood, vanishing.

A doorway materialised.

The Dark Lord entered first. At once, he began opening the thin drawers on one side of the small room, evidently searching for something specific.

Theo's gaze travelled round the cabinets that lined the four walls, drinking in the vast collection of glittering jewellery and tiaras displayed on marble busts behind the glass panes. He hadn't known this room even existed.

Eventually, he noticed a large portrait propped up against the far wall, next to an old trunk on the floor.

Within the gilded frame, a young witch sat in complete stillness, no animation applied to her painted self. The muscles of her pale face did not so much as twitch, her golden eyes did not blink, and her darkly bitter hair ran unwaveringly over her shoulders, which did not rise nor fall. Her hands were folded, motionless, atop the copy of *Hogwarts: A History* in her lap.

"This is supposed to be in the lord's study," Theo said.

"I had Nott remove it last year," said the Dark Lord, without sparing the portrait a glance. "But to have transferred it here without your knowledge …" He clicked his tongue. "How shameful … Why, he must have pricked your finger one night whilst you slept … dreaming and defenceless in your bed."

"Why?" asked Theo.

"I may not be aware of your mother's dying wish, Theodore, but I am certain it was not to be put up on display in his study."

The Dark Lord looked back at him, his eyes narrowing slightly.

"She deserves to have her privacy after all these years … would you not agree?"

Yes, thought Theo. Looking away from his mother's unmoving face, his gaze fell on the old trunk. He slipped past to test its lock.

The lock was, of course, doing its job. Inspired, Theo wiped his bleeding hand on it; like the wall, the lock consumed his blood as if parched, and it released with a clear *click*.

He opened the trunk.

The first item to catch his eye was a ratty old t-shirt which had *FLEETWOOD MAC* emblazoned on the front. Folded beneath it were a shimmering, blue dress that seemed a bit short, with straps a bit thin, and a pair of denim trousers with abnormally wide legs. Muggle clothes, curiously.

Deeper still in the trunk, he uncovered a plain piece of white cardstock, on which, in blue paint, there was a small handprint and an equally small footprint. He picked it up with his left hand, his brow furrowing. Why would this have been kept hidden?

The reason became clear once he turned it over: those five tiny fingers and five tiny toes had not belonged to him. On the back of the card, someone had written, *Harry James Potter*, *31 July 1980*.

"Ah, yes. She framed that one."

Theo raised his head.

It appeared that the Dark Lord had found what he had been looking for; he was now slipping into his pocket a wand that Theo did not recognise.

"Your mother was also a collector," he told Theo. "Like us." And then he turned back to one of the open drawers to retrieve another item. "Nott, on the other hand … merely likes to hide things …"

When he faced Theo again, there was a thin gold chain dangling from one of his long, bloodless fingers. It had no pendant, but on it hung a simple gold ring set with a single diamond so small Theo had to squint to see it.

Instinctively, he knew this ring had belonged to his mother.

"To add to your collection," the Dark Lord said, holding it out.

Theo did not hesitate to take it.

"Whilst I have you here, Theodore, there is another matter with which I would appreciate your willing assistance … one which concerns your friend who has so patiently been waiting downstairs …"

His mouth went dry.

"Might you consider yourself capable of occupying her for the night? And should it prove necessary … longer?"

"Why?"

The Dark Lord tilted his head, studying him closely.

"I am afraid that Paulus Parkinson has an outstanding balance," he said eventually. "I should think that if his granddaughter were to suddenly be … out of reach … he will be most eager to pay it."

Theo blanched.

In horror, he realised that this was why Terric had told the Parkinsons to bring Pansy to dinner with them. Paulus had not thrown a fit simply over being a plus-one; it was with good reason that he had tried to stop Pansy from going through the Floo.

Like Theo, he had feared who would be waiting here.

"How much does he owe?" he asked the Dark Lord warily.

"Ten thousand Galleons — plus interest. Aurelia Parkinson has already been to her brother to plead their case," said the Dark Lord disinterestedly, "but seeing as Avery is, for the time being, occupied elsewhere," (*Odd way to say "imprisoned" but OK.*) "he is no longer in any position to help. It is an unfortunate situation in which they have now found themselves. You see, the Parkinsons, as Avery phrased it to me, 'don't have a pot to piss in.'"

Theo swallowed thickly.

"If you already know they cannot afford it, why have Pansy brought here?"

"To inspire creative thinking," said the Dark Lord.

And then Theo did not think much at all himself.

"I'll pay it," he said. "I'll have control over our family vault in four months, assuming my father's not been returned by then. Can it wait until November?"

"Such a gallant gesture," the Dark Lord remarked, his thin lips twitching briefly. "You forget, Theodore, if you solve all their problems for them … how then will they learn?"

"Terric can inform them what their collateral is."

Theo did not know he was going to say this, but once he had, he felt certain that it was the right thing to have said.

The Dark Lord regarded him a moment longer, his eyes still narrowed. At last, he inclined his head.

"That will be all, then, Theodore."

Recognising his dismissal, Theo rose and, reluctantly, shut the trunk. Tucking the ring into his pocket, he saw himself out.

Nagini was waiting outside the wardrobe. She let him pass without much of a stir, and he walked quickly back to his bedroom.

The first thing he did was lock the door, regardless of how pointless it was; the second thing he did was stare at it, thinking back to another door, another lock, this one turned to keep him out. He remembered pressing his ear up against that door and hoping to hear a sound, any sound, knowing it was worse if he could not.

When I get big, he would think.

But, as everyone kept pointing out, getting big had taken Theo an awfully long time.

He turned away from the door.

In the ensuite bathroom, he rinsed his hand off as fast as he could, wrapped it in a green towelette to staunch the bleeding, and hoped Dinky would be able to get the stain out. Later, he would summon them for some bandages. He could ask for dittany, of course, or go to Terric or Harolyn, either of whom could heal it — prevent the cut from leaving a scar — but the idea of asking them for help filled Theo with a jittery sort of discomfort.

And the idea of the cut melting away, of covering it up and going on as if it had never been there at all, repulsed him.

He went hurriedly back into the bedroom — too hurriedly — and wound up ramming his thigh into the corner of his desk. For a few seconds, he leaned on it with his eyes squeezed shut, cursing silently.

When he forced his eyes back open, his gaze landed squarely on an emboldened, black headline, peeking out from beneath his hand on the desk. He moved his hand off.

DEATH EATERS IN DIAGON ALLEY: WANDMAKER MISSING AND AUROR DEAD

With a sinking feeling in his gut, he skimmed the article below, searching for a name and nothing more, hoping he would be wrong.

Alas, he was not.

... left three injured and one more dead: an Auror who had by chance been nearby when the attack started and was therefore first on the scene. Auror Emmeline Vance had been in Diagon Alley on assignment only hours earlier and had been returning to —

He shoved himself away from his desk, picked up his shoes, unlocked the door, and stampeded back downstairs to Pansy, who was lounging sideways on one of the uglier loveseats and sipping absent-mindedly from what remained of the bottle of champagne.

She looked up at him with relief.

"Oh, good," she sighed, "I was beginning to fear I might actually have to stick my fingers down your throat."

Theo stormed over, grabbed her by the hand, and heaved her to her feet. He ushered her from the family apartments and into the corridor outside, shutting the doors behind them.

"Merlin's beard, Theo, *what* —?"

He whirled round to face her.

"Do me a favour, would you, and tell your grandfather that he's an absolute *FUCKING TWAT*!"

Pansy's jaw dropped.

"And while you're at it, please pass on a 'You're welcome' from me," said Theo furiously, his breath coming out harsh, "and let him know that the next time he fancies having himself a little wager, he might want to check just whose neck is going to be on the line if he loses money he *doesn't have*!"

Her eyes went wider with shock.

"And to answer your question from earlier — *no*, he is *not* at the manor with Draco."

"Y—you don't mean …" Pansy trailed off, gulping, and glanced upwards, as though she might be able to see through the ceiling into the rooms above.

"That is *precisely* what I fucking m—"

A door opened nearby; Theo cut himself off and turned sharply, panting, to find Mr Thicknesse standing just outside the doors to the library. He was wearing a distinctly puzzled expression.

"Do excuse me," he said, in an odd voice, "I seem to have gotten quite turned around on my way to the toilet."

"That's a lot of stairs to take just to find a toilet, sir," said Theo.

"Is it?" said Mr Thicknesse, blinking owlishly. He chuckled. "Well, it would appear I have overindulged this evening, wouldn't it? I do beg your pardon."

He glanced around, then, tossing them a short, polite smile, headed for the stairs. He descended out of sight.

“Has he not been here before?” Pansy murmured uncertainly, after a tense moment.

“He’s been coming here for over six years,” said Theo uneasily. “He knows perfectly well where the toilets are.”

Fortunately, Pansy was able to go home to sleep in her own bed that night, but although Theo was already home, he did not sleep in his. Rather, he stayed awake until dawn and watched from his father’s high-backed desk chair as the weak early light trickled into the darkened study, casting a glittering glow upon the amber-filled decanters on the bar cart.

Staining the wall behind him was a square-like shadow to signify where a portrait had once hung, now a space left empty.

How completely incomprehensible it was to Theo that the Dark Lord could have cared about his mother’s privacy more than his father ever had. But, of course, he only thought this because it was the Dark Lord, and for whose privacy did the Dark Lord care?

Ma’s, apparently.

Theo thought back to what Vance had said about his father the night before: *“I had not thought he was the one who had been hurting her. At the time, I’d believed him guilty only of not stopping it.”*

She had thought it was the Dark Lord, Theo realised, and as she had clearly regretted, she had been wrong.

From the top-left drawer of the desk, Theo retrieved a thin silver case which had engraved on it the initials, *T.C.N.*. He opened it to withdraw one of his father’s hand-rolled cigarettes. He debated for a moment, then slipped the case into his pocket, shut the drawer, and left the study.

On his way down the corridor, he stopped briefly to light the cigarette with the flame of a gold candelabra. Taking a long drag, he carried on toward the stairs. When he reached the second floor, he blew the smoke in the painted face of the portrait of Alwin Nott II, who huffed and puffed and claimed he was going to turn yellow before the turn of the century.

Theo went on his way before Alwin could tack something racist onto that. He made it to the ground floor and out the front doors before he started leaving a trail of ash in his wake for someone else to clean up. As he stepped out into the early morning air, he tapped the end of the cigarette, knocking off the excess ash, and brought it back to his lips, starting down the cobblestone drive.

Finally, he arrived at the wrought-iron gates. He opened them, took another drag for courage, and stepped over the property line.

On the other side, he released the smoke in a long, settling exhale; grey and billowing came his breath, like the twisted, sunless sky above. He tried not to appear too relieved in case anyone should be watching him, either from the house or from some hidden spot down the road.

Now Theo knew for certain: the barrier from his childhood had not been replaced. He could leave still if he wanted.

But where would he go? Anywhere he might turn up, he would need to provide an explanation for doing so. He was not prepared to do this, just as he was not prepared to put anyone at risk, especially after what had happened to Vance, should it be that he was hunted down and brought back. And he would be, wouldn't he?

He knew too much.

It was this being stuck, he now understood, that had kept his mother stuck, too, for so many years. She had not left because he could not, and he could not because, only then, she would not. What he did not understand was why he was allowed to roam free now, whilst he did really know too much.

As the cigarette shortened to a stub and was dropped to the ground at his feet, the answer came to him; there was one thing that Theo could always be trusted to do.

Keep his mouth shut.

He stamped out the cigarette and, lips tightly sealed, turned back toward his home.

By the end of the week, Theo was left with even fewer things to do and even fewer places to go, for he found himself barred from entering the library. According to a bitter Harolyn, Terric had been entrusted with a research project which required total secrecy, even from his wife.

Chapter End Notes

The founding date for the Magical Child Welfare Association is based on actual legislation, specifically The Social Work (Scotland) Act of 1968. Since there were mentions in the books of canings at Hogwarts during Arthur Weasley's time but not the Marauders', this is what I've gone with.

Also, the plot's getting super plotty, so to simplify: the Time-Turners were destroyed, so Voldemort enlisted his followers to make one for Hermione to be sent back; when Harry raided Theo's house in the future, he found two journals full of their research on it, one of which was Theo's, and the other, the Death Eaters. Terric Nott starts the research whilst the others are in Azkaban.

The Ladies' Tea Society

Chapter Summary

> Call all the ladies out
> They’re in their finery
> A hundred jewels on throats
> A hundred jewels between teeth
> — Team, Lorde

Chapter Notes

> CW: So much underhandedness that half the dialogue is unspoken, and brief discussion of body image and dieting.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It began, as though a critical change to the course of one’s life, with a lesson from Evangeline and Narcissa Malfoy.

“What I am about to teach you has fallen out of fashion in the last century,” Evangeline prefaced, standing in the middle of the lady’s parlour with an air of the imparting of great wisdom. “Be that as it may, you still must know if you are to be at all prepared.”

She dropped a pair of kid gloves on the coffee table.

“We ladies have languages of our own.”

Beside her, Narcissa was holding aloft her own pair of gloves, which were frosty-blue and cuffed with a pearl at the wrist.

“To say one thing and to mean another, or for that matter, to communicate without uttering a single word … It has long been our way,” Narcissa said in a clear, cool voice, pulling her gloves inexplicably inside-out. “This is merely one more method of execution with which we may do so.”

Suddenly, she smiled. Her entire demeanour became soft and endearing; a stark contrast from what it had been a split-second ago.

“This may all seem silly to you, Mione, but I implore you to trust me in that we cannot in good conscience allow you, as our friend, to go forth with your decision to join the Society

without having learnt this."

Her smile dropped.

"Now, tell me, did I mean any of that?"

"I assume not, or else you wouldn't be asking," said Hermione.

"Indeed. The answer would be, no, I did not mean any of that," Narcissa confirmed, and she held up her gloves to draw attention to them. "Seeing as my gloves are currently inside-out, what I really meant was that I hate you."

Good grief, Hermione thought in disbelief. *Why would anyone ever bother with this?*

Beside her on the sofa, Bedelia looked pale and fretful, as if she were reconsidering every one of her past interactions.

Theodore and Draco, on the other hand, were much less interested in the current subject of conversation. They appeared to be engaged in a height-measuring contest in the corner, the results of which were somewhat rigged. Neither Dinky nor Dobby seemed eager to tell their young master that he was not actually that tall and they were, in fact, the same height.

"It is vital that you pay close attention," Evangeline told Hermione, drawing one of her own gloves halfway onto her left hand. "With that said, I am *indifferent* to whether you decide to heed our advice or not." She drew them higher, so only her left thumb was exposed, and added wonderingly, "Do you love me?"

She pulled the glove off and dropped both at her feet.

"I love you."

Whilst she had been speaking, Narcissa had righted her own gloves. She now tapped her chin with them.

"I love another," she said.

This tutorial had scarcely commenced, and Hermione was already struggling to take it seriously. Even so, she sat up straighter and made a concerted effort to be more attentive, for it was the advice of Evangeline and Narcissa themselves which had inspired her to do this in the first place.

"Secrets are not uncovered by men, but rather whispered to them by their wives," Narcissa had said years ago, in this very room. *"A high tea or a charity event is the perfect way to pick up on the sort of scandalous information one's husband can then use to achieve his ends. After all, who knows one's worst qualities better than one's wife? A displeased wife may let slip a few things she oughtn't be sharing when there's no men in the room."*

Hermione was betting on it.

On the first Sunday of June, she suited up not unlike a soldier heading off to battle, in flowing pale-blue robes with a frivolous hat to match, sheer stockings, and a pair of white kid gloves. In an afterthought, she tossed the hat; she was not one of them, so why in the world would she pretend to be?

The witches whom she was after today did not think she was on their level, anyway. This had always been the case. The singular distinction between past and present was that they had thought Hermione Granger beneath them, and Mione Nott, quite the opposite.

Let them think what they please, she thought. She no longer had any qualms about using it against them.

In front of the sitting-room fireplace, Tavaris tucked her cedar wand into her handbag with an entirely flummoxed look on his face.

"Why must you have tea at someone *else's* house, Ma?" Theodore whinged. "We've got tea here!"

"Because your mother is apparently a masochist," said Tavaris.

Theodore looked up at him in bemusement.

"What's a maso-kiss?"

"Someone who likes getting tattoos and kneeling in front of people," said Hermione, bending to give him a kiss good-bye. "Pa will tell you about it when you're older. I'll see you later, my love."

"OK," said Theodore, readily enough, but then he added, "and later I'll be old enough for Pa to tell me about maso-kisses?"

"No," said both Hermione and Tavaris at once.

Theodore was distinctly disgruntled.

"*Fine*!" he spat. "If you won't tell me, I'll just ask Uncle Aspa!"

And he stormed out of the room, huffing and puffing.

"For the last time, Theodore, Gaspar is *not* your uncle!"

"He is so!" they heard Theodore shout back, in indignance. "'Cause he's Pansy's and Daphne's and sharing is caring!"

Scoffing, Hermione turned to Tavaris.

"That attitude is Pansy's influence, you know," she said reproachfully.

"Oh, no, darling," said Tavaris. "That was all you."

He leaned against the back of the sofa and regarded her with the same expression of utter mystification that he had worn when he had first learned of her intentions.

Once again, he asked, sounding distressed, "*Why*?"

"Why not?" she replied.

"I can think of a million reasons why not," said Tavaris in an instant. "Would you like me to write them down for you?"

"What was it you once said?" asked Hermione rhetorically, pulling a thoughtful expression. She tapped her chin. "Oh, yes — now I recall. 'I live to entertain myself.'"

"Plagiarism does not qualify as a reason for this madness."

"It's not plagiarism if I cite my sources — and I always do."

He scoffed faintly in disbelief. He then relinquished the pouch of Floo powder he had been withholding.

"Go be entertained, then, darling," he said defeatedly. "And report back to me who wore the stupidest hat."

Smiling, she ducked into the fireplace. She dropped a pinch of the powder on the grate, green flames erupting at her feet, called out, "Thornton!" and was gone.

Awaiting her on the other side was the elder sister of Evan Rosier, the petite, ashy-haired Fiona Selwyn, whose white hat had a short veil and whose dark eyes lit up when Hermione stepped out of the Floo.

"Lady Nott, welcome to Thornton," Fiona greeted, as they exchanged featherlight kisses on the cheek. She stepped back with a wide smile. "Most of the other ladies are already in the ballroom. I will show you there now."

She turned, glancing back to ensure Hermione was following, and proceeded out of the small Floo chamber, through a parlour of creams and blushing pinks, and into a cherry-wooded and white-panelled corridor lined with portraits and marble pedestals, on which perched crystal vases filled with roses that bore an unnatural shimmer.

"I could scarcely believe it when my mother said you would be joining us today," Fiona said as they walked, her smile unwavering. "I had never imagined you would give in to all their hounding —"

As if she hadn't been a part of this hounding herself.

"— though you must have your reasons, of course."

"I do," said Hermione vaguely.

“I shall not ask,” said Fiona, shooting her a conspiratorial look. “I am merely pleased you are here at all.”

She was holding her gloves — threaded with thin white ribbon at the wrists — with the tips pointed downward.

I wish to be acquainted.

“It is a shame, you know, that we should be so unfamiliar with one another,” said Hermione, affecting a conversational tone of voice. “I was well acquainted with your late brother.”

“Evan always spoke very highly of you,” said Fiona, seemingly sincere. “Our father as well.”

Hermione frowned slightly.

“Oh, did he? Strange. I never saw much of Creighton at all.”

“He was there,” said Fiona swiftly. “Perhaps his face was merely … obscured, at the time … but I assure you that he was.”

“That is comforting to hear.”

They neared the end of the corridor, where two suits of armour sprung to life to pull the ballroom doors open to admit them.

“My husband and father-in-law, too, speak highly of you, Lady Nott,” Fiona added at the last second, looking at her significantly.

Hermione did not respond, for she was already turning to have her hands clasped and cheek pecked by Fiona’s mother and the host of that day’s gathering, Ena Rosier.

“I do hope I am not late, Lady Rosier,” Hermione said.

She was — by exactly eleven minutes, according to the clock on a nearby marble mantlepiece.

“No, not at all,” Ena rushed to reassure her, with a dismissive flap of her hand. “We do not tend to take our seats yet anyhow — too much catching up to do. Come. I have sat you next to me.”

The ballroom at Thornton — the home of the Rosier family — was grand and only gently affected, and it was lit largely by the sunlight from its neat row of floor-length windows, draped both by sheer, breezing white and heavy curtains of peach. Presently, the room was filled with white-clothed tables laden with pink roses, porcelain pots, and silver tea towers. All throughout milled and chatted witches of varying ages wearing hats of varying colours and heights.

As she followed Ena down the side of the ballroom, Hermione spotted Narcissa in the distance, conversing with Loretta Yaxley, Sophronia Travers, and Euphemia Rowle, a slanted, pastel fascinator atop each of their heads. Evangeline was nearby, standing between Melania

Black, who was dressed stately in steel-grey and a wide-brimmed hat, and Edolie Parkinson, who was wearing all fuchsia with a much more frivolous hat to match. All three of them were side-eyeing Augusta Longbottom, whose own hat undoubtedly won, at the very least, the height contest, for it was mounted with a stuffed vulture.

As she went down the line of windows, Hermione got a glimpse of the gardens; a waltzing walk of gravel which wound between trimmed hedges and rose bushes alike, with fountains, statuaries, and benches scattered all throughout. On one such bench, she had once sat and discussed running for Minister for Magic with Millicent Bagnold, who had told Hermione, not unkindly, to pitch her voice lower if she wanted it to be taken seriously.

Raising one eyebrow, Bagnold had said archly, *"Really, Madam Granger, did you think this was my natural voice?"*

The summer of 2018, it had been, and Hermione and Bagnold had both been attending a garden party at Thornton which had aimed to raise funds for research into better treatment for the permanent residents of the Janus Thickey Ward at St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries.

Ena led Hermione to a table at the front of the room, where Rohesia Selwyn, Lidwina Rowle, Clovis Yaxley, and Druella Black all stood. Hermione greeted the latter first, just to make the others squirm. The members of the Black family were accustomed to being greeted first, anyway, so it was not exactly out of place.

"I am ever so glad you could make it today, Lady Nott," said Rohesia Selwyn, who had a face rather like a crow. She gave Hermione a beaky peck on the cheek.

"As am I," said Clovis Yaxley purposefully, brushing a hand against her auburn hair as if smoothing back a non-existent flyaway. "I cannot describe to you how pleased I was when Rohesia informed me that you had decided to join us at last." She clasped Hermione's hands with both of her own.

Lidwina Rowle quickly followed suit, smiling heartily.

"It was the happiest of surprises," she agreed.

"Oh, yes," said Rohesia. "Your letter came as quite the shock."

Both her husband, the filibustering Wymond Selwyn, and her son, Lancaster — who would quit winking at Hermione if he knew what was good for him — were Marked Death Eaters. Lidwina's husband and eldest son, Gerlach and Thorfinn Rowle, were Death Eaters, too, and last Hermione had been aware, her youngest, Halfdan, was due to receive the Mark once he came of age. Then, of course, there was Lidwina's daughter-in-law, who had raised Delphini Riddle in secret and who was currently snickering five yards away at something Narcissa had whispered to her. Clovis Yaxley's husband, Beldon, on the other hand, had only been a benefactor of the Dark Lord, but her son, Corban, was firmly in the Inner Circle, and Hermione had suspicions about her daughter-in-law, Loretta, as well.

“Truly, I had all but given up hope,” said Rohesia, gazing at Hermione speculatively. “Would you be so kind as to enlighten us as to the reason for your sudden change of heart?”

Hermione surveyed the room, in no hurry to answer.

“Curiosity, mainly,” she said, looking back at them after a few seconds. “Truthfully, Lady Selwyn, I have found myself growing bored. There has been significantly less … excitement, shall we say … these past few years.”

Rohesia, Lidwina, Clovis, and Ena all exchanged meaningful looks. Meanwhile, Druella sighed lightly.

“Dullness is the new norm, it seems.”

Lidwina nodded. “An apt word for it.”

“Or else, perhaps, a sense of unfulfillment,” Rohesia put in tentatively, searching Hermione’s face for a reaction.

Lidwina nodded again, more firmly.

“Most certainly,” said Clovis, studying Hermione as well. “We carry on but, nevertheless, we feel the loss of … well … the possibility of something more.”

“Excitement, as you said, Lady Nott.”

“An anticipation of impending newness.”

“Nicely put, Ena.”

Druella made a small noise of disagreement.

“*This* is the time of impending newness, ladies,” she said, with quiet bitterness. “What we had been anticipating was a return to the old, the sacred.”

Hermione’s stomach twisted itself into a knot.

“It is a relief to hear that you all think this way,” she lied. “For a moment there, it had seemed as though everyone had moved on, as if the same is not still at stake.”

“We could never forget what is at stake, Lady Nott,” said Lidwina, in a fervent undertone.

“Why, one only needs read the *Prophet* to be reminded!” said Ena. She gave her head a small, disapproving shake. “That Allen Abernathy may be gone but his constituents are not.”

“Who?”

“That Muggle-born wizard who ran for office in the last election.”

“Oh, yes. Killed by his own wife, was he not?”

"*Stabbed*," Ena told them, in a hushed voice. "In the kitchen, I heard — whilst she was cooking! Came in to see what was for supper, Abernathy did, and she whirled round with the knife in hand, caught him completely unawares."

"What a dreadful way to go out."

"Horrid."

"I heard she is a Muggle-born herself, you know," said Clovis significantly.

"Better than the alternative," said Druella, pursing her lips.

"Quite right," said Lidwina, with a short, emphatic guffaw. "We are so fortunate that at least a *few* of them manage to find each other. Best keep to themselves, I say."

"Oh, if only they would."

The knot in Hermione' stomach tightened, her blood beginning to boil. It took everything she had to keep a straight face.

"You know, there was not even an *attempt* at prosecuting her," Rohesia shared, looking at them all with an incredulous expression. "She was held for less than six hours, Wymond says, before they just —" she waved her hand, "— let her go, cool as you please, insisting it must have been the Imperius Curse."

"Now, if she had been a *pure blood*," said Clovis darkly, "you can rest assured they would have tossed her in Azkaban without a second thought."

Hermione's teeth clenched; she eased them apart to speak.

"Do you believe she *was* responsible, Lady Yaxley?"

Clovis blinked at her.

"Well, they never found out who could have cast the Imperius Curse," she replied, after a moment, sounding uncertain.

"No, they didn't, did they?" agreed Hermione, with a slight, mocking smile.

Look at you, kept out of the loop.

Clovis went pink all the way to the roots of her hair.

"I wonder, since you seem to be such a well of information, do you have any idea who it could have been?"

"Oh, I would not presume to —"

Abruptly, Lidwina dropped one of her gloves.

Yes.

“Clumsy me,” she muttered, picking it up off the floor. She straightened and adjusted the precarious perch of her hat. “You really have such spectacular timing, you know, Lady Nott — joining us now. We are so short on members these days that we were *nearly* going to extend an invitation to Inanna Zabini!”

“Yes, that new fiancée of Geoffrey Mulciber’s,” said Clovis quickly. She looked at them all. “Has anyone met her yet?”

“But, of course,” replied Ena. “She was in attendance at Druella’s grandon’s birthday party back in June.”

“Her robes were *quite* low-cut.”

“Oh, dear, were you not there, Clovis?

“Pity.”

“Is this true, Rohesia?” asked Druella, raising a sharp eyebrow in surprise. “You intended to invite *her*?”

Rohesia rolled her eyes dramatically and flapped a hand as if to say, *Don’t even get me started.*

“Apparently, they are only marrying because Mulciber has found himself out of an *heir*,” said Lidwina intently, glancing at Hermione and widening her eyes meaningfully.

Hermione’s smile was genuine this time.

So eager, Lidwina Rowle was, to prove that she was in the know. It seemed this Imperius Curse had been cast by Angus Mulciber.

Instructions would need to be written for when Harry viewed this memory, because Hermione was positive that he would understand absolutely none of what was going unsaid. Too distracted by the hats, probably. In fairness, Lidwina’s was eye-catchingly wobbly. It resembled a large fruit basket and was easily the stupidest of the lot.

“Oh, good, Cassiopeia has arrived!” said Ena suddenly, craning her neck to see across the ballroom. “Now we are only waiting on Walburga. Although —” She hesitated, frowning, and looked at Druella. “Do you know if she intends to come?”

“It would appear not,” said Druella tightly.

“I suppose we may as well begin, then,” said Rohesia, after a small pause.

She faced the room at large and clapped once to gather everyone’s attention.

“Please find your seats now, ladies!”

Conversation continued to flutter as some thirty witches made their way toward their respective seats. Melania Black went to take Cassiopeia’s arm to steer her in the direction of

the correct table. Puttering along at their heels was the latter's emotional-support house-elf, without whom she seemed unwilling to go anywhere.

At the nearest table, Hermione found the crisp, white place card with *Lady M. Nott* printed on it. She sat down between Druella and Rohesia, with Ena on the latter's other side. A few moments later, they were joined by Augusta and her sister-in-law, Enid Longbottom, who had a face that was kind, plump, and heavily-rouged and a hat like a bouquet of wildflowers.

The second Augusta made eye-contact with her, Hermione knew she would have to be twice as careful not to mince her words.

Enid followed Augusta's gaze, then nudged her gently and began fanning herself with her gloves.

Introduce me to your company.

But Augusta, technically, did not know Hermione, either. That she was gazing at her with any degree of familiarity at all was not reassuring in the slightest. Ena caught Enid's signal, however, and spoke up.

"Enid, Augusta, I do not believe you have had the privilege of meeting our newest member." She looked at Hermione, gesturing smoothly. "Lady Nott, this is Lady Augusta and Madam Enid Longbottom."

"A pleasure to make your acquaintances," said Hermione, in a determinedly even voice.

"Indeed," said Augusta frostily.

Enid shot her a curious glance, presumably due to Augusta's less-than-friendly tone. Meanwhile, Rohesia rose to gather everyone's attention once more.

"Good afternoon, ladies," she said, in a voice loud and bright. "As always, a tremendous thank you is owed to our host today, Ena Rosier, for welcoming us into her home." She brought her hands together to conduct a brief rain shower of applause.

Ena cast a small, complimented smile about the room in a practiced performance of humility.

"We have quite a lengthy itinerary to get through today, so without further ado, we shall proceed on to our first order of business. I am deeply humbled" (Hermione supressed a snort, whilst Augusta did not even bother.) "to announce that I have the privilege today of introducing a new member, whom I believe is known to many of you already: Lady Mione Nott." Rohesia glanced down at her expectantly, then added, "If you would please stand, Lady Nott."

Hermione took her time getting to her feet. She looked out across the ballroom, brimming with a collection of pale, painted faces all looking right back at her. There was another calm applause.

"You mustn't let her youth fool you; Lady Nott is a highly educated witch," Rohesia continued significantly, "with N.E.W.T.s in Potions, Herbology, Transfiguration, Charms,

Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, and even Defence Against the Dark Arts."

I get an introduction, thought Hermione, glancing sideways at her in surprise. *She's done her research.*

"As a matter of fact, I have been informed that Lady Nott graduated with the second highest marks in the history of Hogwarts, after —" Rohesia paused, smiling tightly, "— well, just some wizard."

After the Dark Lord. Interesting, she should know this.

There was a light smattering of laughter.

"As you may know, her husband sits on the Wizengamot and is the current Director of the European Potions Trade and Distribution Company. She shall be of great help to us in several of our most recent pursuits." Once more, Rohesia turned to Hermione. She inclined her head graciously. "Welcome to the Ladies' Tea Society, Lady Nott. I believe I do speak for all of us when I say we are gladdened to have you."

"Thank you, Lady Selwyn."

"Rohesia, please, I insist." Her smile was warm, but her gaze had sharpened. "You are one of us now, after all."

"You are too kind," said Hermione dishonestly, smiling back.

The second order of business on the itinerary was, it turned out, pouring one's first cup of tea. The moment Rohesia retook her seat, pastries materialised on the tea towers: sugar-dusted scones, colourful macaroons, little lemon and poppyseed loafs, berry tarts, and shrimp tartlets, along with a variety of finger sandwiches, from cucumber to egg to ham and brie. Everyone removed their gloves to eat.

At once, Enid Longbottom began loading up her plate.

"Oh, you remembered the lemon loafs!" she gasped, in wide-eyed delight, glancing at Ena. "Your house-elf makes the very best."

"It does, doesn't it?" said Ena, looking terribly self-satisfied.

Hermione had to bite her tongue, hard.

"It" was named Hilly. She loathed lemon loafs with all her might. By 2020, she had already long been among the permanent residents of the Headquarters of the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare, because Creighton Rosier had thought ordering her to iron her ears was a perfectly acceptable form of punishment.

Hilly knitted new mittens for Rose and Hugo every Christmas.

"They are decidedly scrumptious," Enid informed Hermione. "I insist you must try one — or several, in fact." She laughed, plucking a second lemon loaf off a tower. "I find I cannot stop

once I start!"

"Oh, but you can hardly tell," said Rohesia, in mocking reassurance.

Augusta paused buttering her scone and looked up.

"Have you done something new to your hair?" she asked Rohesia abruptly. "I must say, dear, you look positively erinaceous."

A snicker escaped Hermione before she could stop it. Druella smirked into her tea, her cool eyes gleaming with amusement.

Rohesia smiled and plumped her curls with one hand, evidently unaware that she had just been told she resembled a hedgehog.

"As a matter of fact, I did get a very small trim recently," she said obliviously. "Thank you for noticing. Goodness knows Wymond never does."

"None of them do, dear," said Augusta, commiserating.

"I suspect I'd need shave near my whole head before Algie took notice," sighed Enid, as she smothered her lemon loaf with clotted cream. "And even then, he would ask only if my earrings were new."

Druella clicked her tongue softly in mutual exasperation. She picked up the milk saucer between Hermione and herself and added quite a splash to her tea.

"Cygnus once confessed that he had not initially believed me to be a natural blonde," she told them, through slightly pursed lips. When Ena let out a shocked giggle, she shot her an irritated look. "It worsens."

"*No*," said Ena, half-amused and half-aghast.

"It was the day our *third* child was born," said Druella ominously. "There Narcissa came into the world with the head of an angel, butter-yellow and already curling into ringlets, and Cygnus turned to me with the most mystified expression on his face and said, 'So that *is* your real hair.'"

Laughter rang about the table. Enid covered her mouth with her hands to express her horror.

"That year that Clovis changed her hair to brown," Ena started, chortling still, "poor Beldon, failing to understand why he could no longer spot the red undertones, began investigating the light fixtures like a wizard possessed! He thought the gas lamps had spontaneously gone cool-toned!"

"*Merlin*."

"Confounded by a simple Colour-Change Charm!"

“You know, you do impress me, Druella,” Augusta cut in. “I had not expected you to count to *three* children.”

Hermione had privately been thinking the same thing.

Druella rolled her eyes and lifted her tea to her lips.

“Do not start with me, Augusta,” she muttered disinterestedly, before taking a sip.

Rohesia’s and Ena’s eyes flitted avidly between the pair. Enid, meanwhile, was enjoying a third lemon loaf.

“I start nothing without intending to, and I do not intend to now,” said Augusta plainly, lifting her own tea off its saucer. “I merely felt obligated to point it out.”

“You ought to try feeling that way less often,” Druella told her. “You may find your health improves.”

“Has yours?”

“Walburga’s certainly has not,” said Hermione briskly.

Augusta glanced at her in mild surprise.

“Quite right,” she said, after a second. “And we all know she does her level best to *try* not to feel obligated to mention *her* number of children.”

Ena winced.

“Walburga is unwell. That is that,” said Druella decisively, sitting quite stiffly now. She put her gloves away in her handbag.

I am vexed.

Augusta held her own gloves loosely in her left hand, smirking.

I am satisfied.

Druella fixed her with a cold look.

“Let us speak no more of Walburga,” she said.

The subject was subsequently discarded, though not without the exchange of a few meaningful glances and pointedly raised eyebrows.

Hermione wished, guiltily, that the Longbottom witches had been sat elsewhere. It would have been a great deal easier to continue conducting this investigation of hers without Augusta able to hear her every word, and worse, hanging onto each one.

What had Frank and Alice told her during the war? Hermione could only imagine, and her imaginings, as of late, had an unfortunate tendency towards that which was decidedly

unpleasant. Whatever Augusta had been told, it was enough to incite her suspicion. She made no attempt to hide it, never once glancing away, so as to pretend she had not been looking, when Hermione caught her eye.

“Have we all finished our first cups?” Ena asked them all a short while later, sitting forward with a hopeful expression.

There were murmurs of assent all around the table. Hermione watched in bewilderment as the others picked up their teacups, each with her left hand.

“All in good fun, Lady Nott,” Ena told her brightly, noticing her expression. “Simply swill the dregs around the cup three times using your left hand, then turn the cup upside down on your saucer and wait for the last bit of tea to drain away.”

As she had spoken, she, Rohesia, Druella, Enid, and even Augusta had all done just this.

You must be bloody joking. Hermione caught her upper lip curling in disdain and hastily pursed her lips against it. Teeming with displeasure, she picked up her empty teacup with her left hand and, thrice, swilled the dregs around.

“Is tessomancy a hobby of yours, Lady Rosier?” she asked, turning the cup upside down.

Ena glanced up from peering into Enid’s teacup. “Oh, yes. Might you have any interest in it yourself?”

“No,” said Hermione bluntly.

Ena exchanged a tense look with Rohesia, who then said, appearing cautious, “Divination can, at times, complicate matters … what with being such an inexact art … but tessomancy truly is a harmless spot of fun, Lady Nott, I assure you.”

“Yes, just a spot of fun,” Ena was quick to agree, and she peered back into Enid’s cup. “For instance, Enid’s tea leaves resemble … oh, why, it has all divided into little squares. You shall have peace and comfort, Enid! How fortunate.”

Enid chortled joyously and showed her cup off to Augusta, who handed her own cup over to be studied next.

“Is that —? Oh, yes, I believe it is. An anchor,” Ena announced, “which points to stability in one’s life and path and —” she looked as if she were smothering a giggle, “— well, being rather difficult to change, but we hardly require Divination to tell us that about *you*, Augusta.”

“In which I take great pride,” said Augusta stoutly.

There were a few (mostly) polite titters.

“You next, Druella.”

Ena spent a minute longer studying the dregs at the bottom of this cup than she had the first two. Yet there was no question in her expression. Merely, her lips formed a thin line.

“Is it something dreadful?” asked Druella indifferently.

Squinting curiously, Enid leaned over for a peek.

“It looks rather like a bird … or perhaps two mountains?”

“Well, then, what do birds and mountains signify?” asked Augusta, as she refilled her tea. She raised one eyebrow. “Shall she tell Cygnus to prepare the will?”

Hesitating, Ena lifted her eyes from the leaves. She gave Druella an apologetic look.

“It is, I fear, the number three,” she admitted awkwardly.

Augusta let out a loud snort.

“A magically powerful number,” said Druella, after a long moment. Nevertheless, she avoided everyone’s gazes as she reclaimed her teacup.

With a long-suffering sigh, Hermione passed her own round the table for Ena to look at next, much to Ena’s clear relief. She accepted the teacup gladly into her hands and began frowning at it.

“Well, that is a cross, just there,” said Enid, interjecting once more to give it a go herself. “Or is it an ‘X’? That would be a warning, would it not, Ena? But what does this circle represent?”

“It is woman,” said Ena, her eyebrows lifting; “Venus.”

“Ooh!” exclaimed Enid, clasping her hands together. She beamed at Hermione. “That means there is to be *romance* in your life, dear!”

Well, that went and put a wrench in it, she thought uncomfortably. No one was supposed to think she had any romance in her current life. Not this lot, anyway.

“Indeed,” Ena confirmed, as both she and Rohesia regarded her with interest. “Love and … romance … lie ahead.”

“Thrilling,” said Hermione flatly.

“I suppose things are well at home, then?” said Druella archly, looking, in contrast, perfectly amused.

Hermione levelled her with an unimpressed look.

With a short chuckle, Druella resumed sipping her tea. Rohesia, on the other hand, now appeared calculating. So concentrated she was on Hermione, she did not even notice when Ena swiped her teacup.

Beside her, Enid gave a great gasp of horror.

“Is that the *Grim*? Rohesia, you approach death!”

“Oh, for — *no*, Enid, it is not the Grim.”

But when Ena looked back at the leaves, there was a twinge of unease in her expression.

“It is the falcon,” she revealed, in barely more than murmur. “You, Rohesia, have a deadly enemy.”

Rohesia sighed.

“Oh, joy.”

“Can you recall anyone for whom you may have caused grave emotional upheaval recently?” Ena asked her concernedly. “Someone who possesses the power to ruin you?”

“I accidentally treaded on Millicent Bagnold’s toes six years ago. Do you suppose she remembers?”

“She does,” said Augusta.

“This is no joking matter,” said Ena, looking absurdly like she meant it. “Think carefully, Rohesia. Is there anyone who might wish you misfortune? Perhaps someone who —”

“Mama, would you take a look at these?” Fiona Selwyn interrupted, appearing suddenly behind Ena’s chair with Sophronia Travers. They had both brought along their teacups.

“Hmm? Oh, o—of course,” Ena stuttered distractedly. She took Fiona’s cup from her, and promptly paled.

Fiona took one look at her mother’s face and sighed grimly.

“So it is the falcon, then.”

“I fear it is, Fiona.”

“Sophronia’s reads the same, see,” said Fiona, offering Sophronia’s teacup. “Loretta and Euphemia both got it, too. Narcissa and Aurelia were the only ones at our table who did not.”

“And you would think, out of anyone, Aurelia Parkinson would be the one to have gone and gotten herself a deadly enemy,” said Sophronia, in an unkind undertone. “That mouth of hers …”

“*Preciosa* Parkinson got it, though.”

“Did she, now?”

“She does tend to get herself into trouble, that one,” said Augusta reprovingly.

Sophronia made a little noise like she was choking back a laugh.

“Trouble?” repeated Druella, raising a dubious eyebrow. “Come now, Augusta, we must not make such harmful assumptions merely because a young witch went to stay with a distant relative at a remote location for approximately nine months.”

“You are right. That would be jumping to conclusions.”

“Nearly every cup I overturned, I saw the same image,” Fiona went on, exchanging a worried look with her mother. “And then, of course, Preciosa came wandering over with her cup when she overheard Aurelia’s snickering.”

“One never *overhears* Aurelia’s snickering,” said Sophronia, in a low, haughty voice. “Wherever one goes, it is always ringing right in one’s ear.”

“But that is now *five* falcons, Mama,” Fiona was saying.

“What did you get, Mother?” Sophronia asked Rohesia, who was looking less and less indifferent about her own tea-leaf reading by the second.

“A falcon,” she replied, with a small frown. “I suppose you and I may have the same deadly enemy, my dear.”

Just then, Ena finally turned over her own teacup, only to find yet another grainy, misshapen image supposedly depicting a falcon.

“I suspect it is us *all* who have acquired the same deadly enemy,” she said, in an ominous voice.

She, Rohesia, Fiona, and Sophronia all promptly began looking around the ballroom, as if expecting this enemy to suddenly leap out from behind the curtains and attack them.

“Well, I am feeling very glad for all my difficult-to-change-ness right about now,” said Augusta blithely. “Enid, how are you enjoying your peace and comfort?”

“It is … peaceful,” mumbled Enid sheepishly.

“Druella, are you and the number three getting on any better?”

“We have managed to reach an accord,” said Druella.

“Lady Nott.” Augusta paused. “Eager for your future lover?”

“I am shivering with anticipation,” said Hermione shortly.

Sophronia glanced at her.

“What did you get, Lady Nott?” she asked curiously.

“A bounty of impending love and romance, apparently.”

At this, Sophronia's gaze turned thoughtful.

Meanwhile, Ena had risen to check the leaves of those seated at the nearest table, gesturing impatiently for each one to finish her tea. Fiona trailed after her, grabbing and overturning cups without warning. More falcons kept cropping up.

Hermione felt her scepticism start to slip. There were too many for it to be a mere coincidence.

"*A — a deadly enemy*!" Kaelyn Crabbe spluttered in shock.

"My word, I have one, too!" cried Jillian Goyle.

"As do I!" said Clovis Yaxley incredulously.

"I as well!" gasped Lidwina Rowle, a second later.

"Merlin, have mercy, you have the falcon, too, Mrs Carrow!"

Ena hastened over to the next table.

"Oh, thank the heavens!" she cried out in relief, a minute later. She held up Honoria Macmillan's cup for all to see. "A sun! Honoria has a sun!"

"That is a positive symbol, I take it?" said Honoria unsurely.

"Why, *yes*!" said Ena emphatically, squeezing her shoulder. "You shall experience *great* happiness, Honoria!"

Honoria smiled, then shrank guiltily in her seat upon receiving an envious look from Edolie Parkinson.

"The Black witches are all safe from enemies!"

"That settles it, then," said Augusta sarcastically. "This must all be true."

Druella scoffed in annoyance.

"Ivanna has no deadly enemy, either! Oh, but … erm … you can expect trials and suffering in your future. My apologies, Ivanna."

Ivanna Greengrass sighed.

"Evangeline is safe as well!"

Augusta shot a sceptical glance at the back of Evangeline's head, chuckled lowly, and carried on sipping her tea.

"You shall merely face grievous change! Or … or just grief."

“Narcissa, dear, what does yours read?” Evangeline asked, craning her neck to see her at the next table over.

“Greater than or less than, Fiona says,” Narcissa told her, speaking over her shoulder. “It is undecided.”

“I am to receive unexpected gold!” Aurelia Parkinson announced to the room at large, wearing a gloating grin.

“The acorn also represents *windfall*,” Fiona informed her, in a bitter voice. “You know, as in an apple blown off a tree.”

“May it land very far, indeed,” Sophronia muttered scornfully under her breath.

“We must *all* have a *common enemy*!” shouted Ena, becoming increasingly frantic. “There is no other explanation! Think, ladies! *Think*! Who could it be?”

For perhaps the first time ever, a meeting of the Ladies’ Tea Society was descending rapidly into clamouring chaos. Once again, Rohesia got to her feet. She held out her hands in a calming gesture.

“Ladies, we must not lose our heads!” she said, in a commanding voice. “Divination is an *inexact* art!”

“*It is being a little too exacting right now, Rohesia*!”

All of a sudden, the sound of glass shattering tore through the thickening air of the ballroom; everyone’s heads snapped round.

Bedelia looked extremely discomfited to have abruptly found herself the centre of attention.

“Sorry,” she said, in a very high voice. “I dropped my teacup.”

“*But I have not read the leaves yet*!” Ena lamented loudly.

“Not to worry,” said Fiona, patting Bedelia’s shoulder and looking worried, “I highly doubt you have very many enemies, Bedelia. You are likely among the exempt, like your mother and Cecillia.”

Bedelia gave her a tight, anxious smile.

And with that, the last of Hermione’s scepticism ebbed away.

A bad omen, abruptly appearing the very day she had joined them, of an enemy in their midst. A deadly one, at that.

It was utterly ridiculous, an inexact art if even an art at all, and it could not be trusted as the truth, and yet, she could feel the corner of her lips lifting into a smirk.

“Do you suppose Lady Rosier might be right?” she asked, in an airy voice, glancing sidelong at Rohesia. “About a common enemy.”

“Well, I do not see how we could all suddenly have the same deadly enemy,” said Rohesia at once, “for in order to have one in common, it must be someone whom we have somehow *collectively* caused offense through our *collective* actions or …” She fell silent, all expression melting from her face. She turned her head slowly to stare at Hermione in faint shock. “Or our collective inactions,” she finished feebly.

Hermione smiled innocently.

“How peculiar,” she said, feigning curiosity. “I wonder … whoever could it be?”

Rohesia regarded her warily. Even amidst the current unbefitting volume of the gathering, her swallow was audible. Finally, she turned to the others still seated at their table, all of whom seemed mildly entertained by the ongoing commotion behind them.

“Please, excuse me a minute,” she said, and she stalked away, striking her gloves over her shoulder as she went.

Follow me.

After waiting a minute, Hermione murmured to Druella that she had to powder her nose, pulled her gloves back on, rose, and traced Rohesia’s path out of the ballroom.

At the end of the long corridor outside, a door on the right had been left ajar. Hermione approached it, a giddy stirring in her chest, and slipped inside what she knew to be Creighton Rosier’s private study. Somewhat ironically, she had snuck into this room before, once, during a charity auction to steal a word with Harry about a sensitive case.

There were no eavesdropping portraits in this particular room. Creighton was too superstitious for that. Rohesia must have known it, seeing as this was where she had led Hermione.

She was pacing a hole in the oriental rug when Hermione entered. The afternoon sunlight streamed into the study from the glass-paned doors behind her, casting a golden glow over the colourful titles lining the tall bookcases.

Hermione shut the door with a *snap*.

In an instant, Rohesia stopped pacing and looked up. When she opened her mouth to speak, however, Hermione put a finger to her lips. She then put her back to Rohesia, withdrew her wand from her handbag, and, silently, cast a Muffling Charm over the door.

When she turned back round, it was to find that Rohesia had gone rigid. Her dark eyes were wide and glued firmly to the cedar wand in Hermione’s hand.

“Well?” said Hermione expectantly, waving the wand in a careless gesture just to see Rohesia stiffen further. “You wished to speak with me alone? Or had I misread you?”

Rohesia tore her eyes from the wand to meet her gaze.

"You had not," she said, in a tense voice. "You … you must forgive our inaction, Lady Nott."

Hermione raised both her eyebrows.

"Must I?"

"*Yes*!" Rohesia told her forcefully, without pause. Her expression was needily imploring. "They are merely whispers — the very faintest, at that! How are we to know if they hold even a modicum of truth?"

Hermione had no idea what she was talking about, so she just raised her eyebrows higher and kept holding her wand aloft.

"We cannot act upon a rumour! Believe me, if there were any substantial evidence — any at all — Wymond and Lancaster would be among the very first to take the necessary action!"

"Would they, really?" she asked dubiously, still very lost.

"*I swear this to you*," said Rohesia, with increasingly feverish ferocity. "And the Traverses, too. My daughter has assured me that Lachlan and Carden Travers await the first true sign that these whispers have weight to them, just as my husband and son do. As would Sophronia's husband, had he not been caught!"

"But Eamon Travers *was* caught."

"With honour! He gave the Aurors no names!"

Hermione gave her a conceding nod.

"Thanks to his indiscretion — to his *loyalty* — more of the Dark Lord's followers remain free to lie in wait," Rohesia went on strongly, her expression becoming resolute, "and should these whispers be realised, their actuality proven, Wymond and Lancaster, along with the Traverses, will be ready to set out for Albania on a second's notice."

Hermione inhaled sharply. Now, she understood.

Albania was where the Dark Lord was. There, he lived on as little more than a wraith, lurking in the dark depths of the same forest where he had years ago uncovered the Lost Diadem of Rowena Ravenclaw and possessing snakes in order to sustain himself. Perhaps he had met Nagini by now, or perhaps she would come later.

Eventually, Quirinus Quirrell would cross his path, fail, and the Dark Lord would flee back to the same forest. There, he would be found once more and, that time, he would be successfully revived by Peter Pettigrew and Barty Crouch Jr, with the unwilling assistance of an unfortunate witch named Bertha Jorkins.

Whispers. There had been whispers of him.

Yet, none of his followers were so much as lifting a hand.

No wonder Rohesia Selwyn was so on edge. Clearly, she was under the false impression that she was being confronted about her family's disloyalty by his — what, exactly? Mistress? Concubine? Consort? Bit on the side? She even seemed to fear Hermione herself, to some indistinguishable degree, by the way her eyes kept darting back to the cedar wand. After all, she had never seen a wand in Hermione's hand before; almost none of them had.

It probably seemed a bad sign to Rohesia to see it now.

"H—has Nott done anything?" she asked, searching Hermione's face with a renewed sense of desperation. "He has heard the same whispers himself, surely. Has *he* acted upon them?"

Hermione let the moment stretch, partly because she did not immediately know how to best answer and partly to witness the rise and fall of Rohesia's chest grow quicker and heavier with each passing second that she did not.

"No," she said at last. "As you said, they are … whispers …"

Rohesia looked relieved.

"*But* … whispers hold a weight of their own," Hermione continued, at length, causing that relief to leave as quickly as it had come. "Tavaris does more than hear them; he listens for them. Forgive me, Mrs Selwyn, but like I told you earlier, for a while there, it had seemed to me almost as though the rest of you had gone deaf."

"No." Rohesia shook her head firmly. "We are listening. We always have been."

"What a relief," said Hermione softly.

Rohesia straightened her posture and smoothed her slime-green robes, her breath steadying. "Anything that we should hear," she murmured heedfully, her gaze cast low, "I shall be sure to pass on to you, Lady Nott."

"I would consider myself very fortunate, indeed, if you did."

Hermione waited another moment, then stepped back from the door and pulled it open. She held it, signalling for Rohesia to exit first.

"Do bear it in mind, Mrs Selwyn," she said when Rohesia was at the threshold, making her pause; "although a single whisper alone is often too soft to hear, when a room full of people are whispering, it is impossible to miss."

Rohesia nodded once, tightly, and continued out the door. Hermione let go of the doorhandle so it would swing shut behind her, purposefully, just missing her heels.

Then she let out a rush of breath and sagged against the closed door, her eyes sliding shut.

"OK … OK …" she muttered, attempting to steel herself. She nodded her head determinedly. "OK."

She opened her eyes again and straightened up off the door. Just as she was about to remove the Muffling Charm and leave, however, she hesitated. Lowering her wand, she let out a scoff. Her lips twisted with suppressed wrath, ever straining.

"*I heard she is a Muggle-born herself, you know*," she mocked spitefully under her breath. "*So fortunate at least a few of them manage to find each other*. *Oh, yes, best keep to them-bloody-selves, I say.*"

In the empty study, Hermione let herself sneer.

And in the empty study, with no one about to see her do it, she bit down on the fingertips of one glove.

I wish to be rid of you very soon.

She yanked the glove off with her teeth.

*

If Tavaris had heard any rumour of the Dark Lord hiding out in Albania, he had not mentioned it. Hermione was doubtful that he would. It was vastly easier to carry on in spite of something when one did not speak of it, and the two of them had an ever-increasing skill for not speaking of things.

Wisely, she did not mention it, either. All she told him about the day was that Lidwina Rowle had worn the stupidest hat, at which he did not seem too surprised.

That same August, Hermione learned that Daphne had begun taking vocal lessons. A wizard who worked with the opera singers at the Bard Theatre of Enchanting Dramatics visited the Greengrasses' home every Saturday to tutor her for three long hours.

It reminded Hermione of what Walburga Black had said back in May about the integral instruction of young witches in musical ability, thus preparing them to perform for the guests of their future husbands. The thought that this may be the case made her blood boil. Even now, it seemed as though Daphne were in a perpetual state of performance — a performance which she was far too young to consider necessary.

She was only four years old.

Already, she barely spoke, at least in front of adults. Even when she did, it was in the softest and gentlest of voices, never at a volume too high or in a tone too harsh; hers was a voice that was endearing to listen to, and easy to ignore. Her mere presence, she kept unobtrusive.

It took Hermione by surprise, how swiftly and deeply it began to infuriate her in the weeks that followed her first meeting of the Ladies' Tea Society. How old would Daphne be before her mother started teaching her to swing her gloves about instead of saying aloud what she really thought?

It brought to mind Daphne's older self. All their older selves.

Out of them all, Hermione had spent the most time in Draco's company. Haughty little lobbyist that he was, he had constantly gone sticking his nose into everything, like an unreachable spider on a bedroom ceiling, lingering there so long that it became less fearsome and more a familiar source of exasperated indifference.

But Daphne, she had seen, too, sometimes alongside Pansy at a charity function organised by the Ladies' Tea Society, members as they both would one day be, like their mothers and grandmothers before them. Hermione could picture the pair still, whispering with their heads bent together, or else smirking and swishing their gloves at each other from opposite ends of a room.

Daphne had appeared on the outskirts of Hermione's social circles a great deal more than Pansy had, though. Her husband, Adrian Pucey, would become the Lead Liaison Minister for the Department of International Magical Cooperation, of which Ernie Macmillan would be Head. Hermione had seen a lot of Blaise Zabini, too, for he had worked as Pucey's Senior Advisor and had often stepped in for him. On top of this, Victoire Weasley had become Pucey's Junior Assistant. She had frequently come home to the flat she and Teddy shared, rented out beneath Hermione and Ron's townhouse on Downing Street, with anecdotes about Blaise Zabini's narcissism or the lack of personality seemingly possessed by Daphne Pucey.

"I had to go round on my break to pick up some papers Mr Pucey forgot at home," Victoire would say, whilst sat at Hermione and Ron's dinner table because she and Teddy had craved the latter's cooking. "Mrs Pucey was puttering about the parlour, *straightening the pillows*. She wasn't even expecting company. *I* would know, considering how often I need to rearrange their social calendar."

Lately, Hermione found herself frequently recalling another version of the children as well — of Pansy and Daphne, specifically. The pair of them in school, snickering behind her back or, when it suited them, right in her face.

The pure vanity of it.

Now, she was recalling these versions of them in a different light. To the forefront of her mind came countless memories of Pansy fat-shaming Neville, with Daphne and the other girls in their little gang giggling dutifully at her side, when, one day, they both started refusing pudding after lunch.

"I'm only allowed pudding on *special occasions*," Pansy explained in a sour voice, whilst Daphne nodded along in agreement.

With a big, grumpy sigh, Pansy dropped her chin onto her hand, as if her head had abruptly gotten too heavy to remain upright on its own. She glowered at the small platter of Dinky's homemade Jammy Dodgers, for which Hermione had scrounged up and copied down a recipe to give them and which she had told everyone were simply jam biscuits her mother had used to bake.

Neither Theodore nor Draco had any qualms about stuffing their faces with them.

"*Three* each," Hermione reminded them sternly, before looking back at Pansy and Daphne. "Why only on special occasions?"

"Mother says if I eat too much pudding, I'll get frumpy and everyone at Hogwarts will bully me," said Pansy, in a disturbingly matter-of-fact manner. "Daphne's mother says she must watch her figure, but we think that means the same thing as not getting frumpy. It does, right?"

Hermione had to take a very deep breath before she could trust herself to speak at a reasonable volume.

"I beg your pardon?"

Daphne appeared immediately chastised by her tone of voice alone. She bowed her head.

"Sometimes Daddy slips me sweets," Pansy sighed, looking glum, "but only if Mother isn't looking."

"I'm sorry, Lady Mione," said Daphne softly, gazing up at her beseechingly. "I promise the biscuits look very delicious."

Beneath her indignance, Hermione felt a small, guilty, selfish gladness that Theodore had not been born, into this cold, barren social landscape, a girl.

As she was beginning to understand, to grow up a girl in this closed-off section of wizarding society presented several troubling predicaments of its own. One could easily wind up like Aurelia Parkinson, the receiver of snide remarks, for speaking too loudly and too often; like Preciosa Parkinson, shamed in undertones, for being suspected of having once had an accidental pregnancy; or like Bedelia, so soft, so silent, so often invisible. Hermione had no idea how she would have been able to protect a daughter from it. Or, for that matter, Pansy and Daphne.

As the summer's end drew ever nearer, Daphne's vocal lessons swiftly became a source of anxiety. Hermione did not hear any of this from Daphne, of course; she heard it from Theodore, who rattled on about it after an early dinner one evening roughly three weeks after the lessons had commenced.

"She has to remember *all* the notes, Ma," he said with an expression that begged for her incredulity over the matter, as they sat on her bathroom floor and she attempted to paint his ceaselessly wriggling toes. "In the right order, too, or else he's cross with her. But then — then d'you know what he does?"

"What does he do?"

"Then he mixes all the notes up!"

Hermione grasped his ankle to still his foot. With her thumbnail, she wiped off the excess blue polish that had wound up on the tip of his big toe. He had picked the shade to match his stuffed Swedish Short-Snout.

On the counter behind her, Crookshanks was perched, watching avidly, next to a wizarding wireless that was tuned in to the *Witching Hour*, which had recently been bumped down to a later time, when, supposedly, most witches would be cooking supper. The bathroom door was left open, letting *A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love* float out into the bedroom and further still, into the hall; a small slice of freedom, it was, not feeling the need to have the door shut just to allow an extra second's warning before someone entered.

Presently, Tavaris was in Paris to meet with the Director of the French Bureau of Coordination of International Magical Affairs.

He would be in Vienna next, then Prague, and then he was scheduled to attend a conference with the world's top potions trading partners at the International Confederation of Wizards, which would be presided over by the Supreme Mugwump, none other than Albus Dumbledore. Ever the frugal bunch, the Department of Magical Transportation had arranged for a shared International Portkey for Tavaris and Professor Dumbledore to travel back to England together. Tavaris would not return home until the day before his fifty-eighth birthday at the end of the month, and suffice it to say, he would be in a foul mood when he did.

"Mixing the notes up is how one makes a song," Hermione told Theodore, moving on to the next toe.

"But — but they're supposed to go in the right order!" exclaimed Theodore, struggling to wrap his mind around this. "Like when we sing the alphabet — it's not your ABCs if you go, '*Z*,' '*P*,' '*A*,' because that would be positive-idly *stupid*!"

"Don't call things 'stupid.' And it's *positively*."

"OK. I'm sorry, Ma."

"It's all right, my love."

"But you can't just *mix it up*!"

"If we always put letters in the same order, Theodore, we would never be able to spell more than one word," Hermione explained, setting his left foot aside, finished, and bringing his right closer. "Just as if the notes were always in the same order — stop wriggling — there would only ever be one song. Take Celestina Warbeck's songs for example. Does every song of hers sound the same as *A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love*?"

Theodore paused, a furrow at his brow, to listen to the wireless.

"No," he admitted, after a moment. "She says different words."

"And the music behind the words — that sounds different, too, does it not?"

His frown deepened.

"Yes." He shook his head stubbornly. "But how is Daphne supposed to remember the right order if he keeps mixing it up? She had a *nightmare* about messing up the notes last night, Ma, she was *so* scared, and Mrs Greengrass is making her do it, *anyway*. It's not fair!"

If Tavaris were here, he would say that life was not fair. True as it rang, Hermione did not want Theodore to grow up believing this.

Sighing, she released his foot and leaned back against the cupboard behind her.

And then she got an idea.

The next day, early in the afternoon when the children (and Crookshanks) were all gathered in the schoolroom at Nottingham Hall, she picked up a stick of chalk and faced the blackboard. Very intently, she wrote: *Do Re Mi Fa So La Ti Do*.

"What's that say, Ma?" asked Theodore, from their cluster of desks.

"Why don't we see if Daphne can tell us?" she replied, turning back to them all and holding the chalk aloft. "Daphne, do you know what this says? You can come closer if you need to."

Gingerly, Daphne stood up and approached the blackboard. She studied it for a few seconds, twisting her hands nervously, then looked up at Hermione and nodded slowly.

"It's music notes, Lady Mione," she said, in a quiet voice. "From the solfège scale."

"That's right, very good. Do you know which ones?"

She looked at the blackboard again.

"*Do … Re … Mi … Fa … So … La … Ti … Do*," she read, with almost painful slowness. She smiled proudly to herself.

"I hear you've been having rather a hard time remembering the order of these notes," said Hermione gently. "It just so happens that I've a trick for that."

Daphne's eyes widened hopefully.

"Would you like to learn it?"

She nodded her head rapidly, squeezing her hands tight and leaning with eagerness onto the tips of her toes.

"All right. Let's begin with the first note, shall we?" said Hermione, smiling. She pointed to it. "*Do*. What word does that sound like to you? And you can all answer," she added to the others.

"My stockings are itchy," Pansy grumbled, scratching her leg.

"You have good stockings," Draco told her, with an air of great importance. "We all do. Dad says so."

Hermione sighed deeply.

Thankfully, Theodore piped up, "*Dough*, like Dinky uses!"

“That’s a good one.” But it was not what Hermione was looking for, so she turned back to the blackboard and wrote as she spoke. “Another word is *doe*, as in a female deer — ‘D’ — ‘O’ — ‘E.’” Crudely, she drew one. “You can tell a deer is female if it does not have any antlers. Only the males — stags — have those.”

“Why?” asked Theodore, predictably.

“So they can stab people with them?” asked Draco.

Hermione’s head whipped round.

“*No*,” she said immediately, aghast. “Not to — to *stab* people! Stags do not go about stabbing people with their antlers, Draco! They are kind creatures — *loyal* creatures. Do you know what that word means? Loyal.”

They all shook their heads. Even Crookshanks, who was curled atop her desk, looked at her as though awaiting an answer.

“It means that they always stand up for their friends.” She swallowed thickly. “It means that they can be brave, even when things are scary, in order to protect the people whom they love.”

“Are stags your favourite animal, Lady Mione?” asked Pansy shrewdly, now swinging her feet idly back and forth under the desk.

“One of them,” said Hermione softly.

“Mine is unicorns because they *loathe* boys.”

Daphne giggled into her hands, meanwhile Draco looked terribly affronted.

“Mine is *dragons*!” announced Theodore enthusiastically.

In an instant, Draco turned his scowl on him instead.

“No, it’s not!” he snapped. “*Mine* is dragons! Because that’s my name and you’re not allowed to take it!”

“Draco, you can both have the same fav—”

“Fine!” said Theodore, before Hermione could finish. “Then my favourite is Flobberworms.”

Pansy wrinkled her nose in disgust.

“That’s gross, Theo.”

“So what? I like when they go all floppy,” he said, and he began flapping his arm loosely like a fish out of water in demonstration.

“We’re getting off topic.” Hermione turned back to the board, taking a deep breath. “Now, we can remember the first note like this: Do, a deer, a female deer.”

Daphne repeated the words under her breath, her face screwed up in concentration.

“Let’s try the second note, which is pronounced *ray*,” Hermione told them, drawing a small sun. “Re, a drop of golden sun …”

One by one, she went through each of the notes, drawing next a smiley face, then a curving road, a sewing needle, a music note, a cup of tea, and another, slightly improved doe.

“Now, these are only the tools we use to build a song,” she explained, a bright little ball of excitement unravelling within her chest. “Once you have these notes in your heads, you can sing a million different tunes by mixing them up.” At Daphne’s anxious look, she added hastily, “But we won’t be doing that just now.”

Her shoulders sagged with relief.

“Do we —?” she started, and then she stopped, looking down at her shoes.

“Lady Mione, I think she’s asking if —”

“She can speak for herself, thank you,” said Hermione, cutting Pansy off. She looked back at Daphne and rubbed her shoulder encouragingly. “Go on, Daphne. Do we — what?”

Daphne bit her lip and mumbled something unintelligible.

“A little louder. Let us hear that lovely voice of yours.”

She shuffled her feet, took a deep breath, and lifted her head.

“Do we sing it now?” she asked, ever so softly.

“Clever girl,” said Hermione, grinning at her. “Yes. We sing it.”

Daphne grinned back, rosy-cheeked. She ducked her head bashfully.

Suddenly, Pansy made a noise like a car without a muffler.

“No fair!” she cried, standing up and slamming her hands on the desk. “I want to be a clever girl, too!”

Hermione looked at her sharply.

“*Pansy Parkinson*! There is absolutely *no* reason you should be hitting things out of anger!” she said, in what she distantly recognised as rather too harsh a voice for small children. “*Ever*. Am I clear?”

Pansy stomped her foot.

“*Am — I — clear*?”

Theodore and Draco exchanged a significant look when Pansy did not say anything.

“You *are* a clever girl,” Hermione continued severely, her patience straining, “but you are not being very clever right now, stomping your foot like that.”

“No, I’m *not* a clever girl!” Pansy insisted hotly, stomping again. Her eyes had filled with tears at an alarming speed. “I’m only a *precious* girl! Daddy says so!”

“I’m a clever boy,” said Draco abruptly, as if stating a fact.

“Me, too,” said Theo easily.

Hermione nodded at them distractedly in acknowledgement as she approached the desks. She crouched down in front of Pansy, frowning at her small, reddening, pug-like face.

“You can be a precious girl *and* a clever girl,” she told her, in a clear, firm voice. “In fact, you are. But stomping your foot will not get you your way, certainly not with me.”

“Mummy says I’m a pretty girl,” said Daphne, who had moved silently to appear beside them. “Can I still be clever?”

She looked so worried that Hermione had the sudden and intense urge to slap Cecillia Greengrass across the face.

“Being pretty does not mean you cannot be clever,” she said vehemently, glancing from Daphne to Pansy and back again. “You are *both* precious, and you are *both* pretty, and you are *both* very, very *clever* — and anyone who says otherwise is a rotten, dim-witted git and you have my full permission to tell them so. Is that understood?”

Daphne and Pansy exchanged wide, disbelieving grins.

“Yes, Lady Mione,” they said together, in loud voices each.

“Excellent. That’s settled, then,” said Hermione definitively. “Now, Daphne, are you ready to sing the song with me? I want to hear that lovely, *brilliant* voice of yours.”

At once, Draco began belting it out, with complete confidence, a complete lack of tune, and all the wrong words.

When their mothers came to fetch them a few hours later, the four of them gave an impromptu performance, directed by Pansy, who stood at the front and waved her arms about wildly like a seizing conductor, as, altogether, they sang:

“*Do, a deer, a female deer*

Re, a drop of golden sun

Mi, a name I call myself

Fa, a long, long way to run

So, a needle pulling thread

La, a note to follow so

Ti, a drink with jam and bread

That will bring us back to do, oh, oh, oh …"

Aurelia Parkinson applauded them with bright laughter, Cecillia Greengrass extended her sincere thanks for helping her daughter revise, and Narcissa, smiling warmer than Hermione had witnessed her do in years, declared it the best musical performance she had ever seen.

"It's called *Do-Re-Mi*," Draco informed them all, puffing his chest out with pride.

Pansy nodded impressively. "It's about the sound of *music*!"

"A song about the sound of music?" said Narcissa, raising her eyebrows slightly and smiling still. "My goodness, is that not marvellously precious?"

The moment everyone was gone, Hermione dropped onto the chair behind her desk and laughed herself hoarse.

"What's so funny, Ma?" asked Theodore, as he and Crookshanks both stared at her oddly.

She wiped her eyes on the back of her hand and let out a final, wheezing giggle. She grinned at him and reached out to smooth back his hair. Cupping his cheek, she said, "Your uncle will tell you about it when you're older."

"But you said I don't have an uncle," he replied, in confusion.

"No, you don't," she agreed, her grin softening. She dropped her voice to a whisper. "But can you keep a secret, my love?"

Theodore nodded hurriedly.

"I mean it, Theodore. You mustn't ever tell anyone."

"I won't, Ma," he said at once. "I swear."

Hermione smiled again, gently now, and leaned in to whisper directly into his ear.

"One day, you will have *six* uncles."

*

The sun was setting at Thornton, and Creighton Rosier was sitting at his study desk, watching through the glass-paned doors as it dipped below the distant hedges of the rose gardens in a glowing, orange haze.

He leaned back in his chair and let out a long, satisfied sigh.

The day had been good. Although this could not normally be said of one on which a meeting of the Wizengamot was drawn out as extremely as today's had been, and although the result had been less than ideal — for nothing to do with Percy Weasley being put in charge of anything ever was — the reason behind the emergency meeting more than made up for it.

Smirking to himself, Creighton returned his attention to yesterday's copy of *The Daily Prophet*, still laying out on his desk despite how many times he had read it since its arrival. Now, he simply liked looking at it.

He was not alone in this, he knew.

MINISTER FOR MAGIC LOST IN TIME: POTTER DECLARES NATIONAL EMERGENCY

Yesterday, November the second, at approximately a quarter-past one o'clock in the afternoon, Minister for Magic Hermione Granger vanished from her office in the Headquarters of the Ministry of Magic. As of last night, Harry Potter, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, has declared a national state of emergency.

In a brief press conference last night, Head Auror Terry Boot revealed that the sole witness to the troubling incident was Granger's husband, Ronald Weasley, who had stopped by the Minister for Magic's office to take her out to a late lunch. As Weasley reported to the Auror Office, Granger had been in the process of destroying an unregistered and illegal Time-Turner — the second of which to have been created by Theodore Nott, who is currently serving the consequent sentence in Azkaban Prison and has been since this past August. Startled by Weasley's abrupt arrival, Granger disturbed the Time-Turner, triggering it to send her back to a time presently unknown.

"The Time-Turner in question must be highly temperamental in order for it to have worked without the Minister for Magic's deliberate usage," Professor Saul Croaker, lead specialist on time-related magic, told the Prophet *at last night's press conference.*

The Department of Mysteries' own stock of Time-Turners was reportedly destroyed during the Battle of the Department of Mysteries on June the eighteenth of 1996. However, each device once belonging to this collection was only capable of sending a person back five hours; according to Croaker, this is "the greatest amount of time one can travel without risking any temporal anomalies such as un-births, the death of their future or past selves, or the creation of an alternate timeline." While Nott's Time-Turners can take someone back an undetermined amount of time, they do not have the power to bring someone to a new location. Therefore, it is certain that the Minister for Magic would not have left her office. There is no saying how far back she has travelled, as those in the Department of Mysteries

have yet to uncover record of any time-travellers ever appearing in the Office of the Minister for Magic.

"With no current leads," Head Auror Boot told the press, "we as a nation are faced with a crisis unlike any other."

To no one's surprise, Potter has taken over the investigation into the Minister for Magic's disappearance himself, but with a lack of information on past appearances, there seems to be little chance thus far of a favourable outcome. We can only hope that the Minister for Magic will turn up herself, for if she does not, Croaker claims that she is likely "already lost to us all."

The Wizengamot is scheduled to gather tomorrow morning to address the question of who will be taking over as Interim Minister for Magic in Granger's absence. More news on the matter still to come.

We at The Daily Prophet *keep the Granger-Weasley family in our thoughts. Our hearts go out to the Minister for Magic's husband and children, Rose, 15, and Hugo, 12, during this trying time.*

For more detail on the Department of Magical Law Enforcement's next actions, see page 3. Further information regarding time-related magic can be found on page 6.

He chuckled softly.

Fate was proving itself a worthy friend. After decades of lying in wait, followed by decades more of keeping his head down, the times were finally changing.

Perhaps this, Creighton speculated, had been the true aim of Delphini Riddle, with all that meddling of hers in recent months which had brought her face to face with a Dementor. Perhaps this had even been the true aim of Theodore Nott, when he had begun the construction of his Time-Turners. In Azkaban though he now was, he had surely succeeded in what he had set out to do. It could be that someone else had been working alongside him, and was working alongside him still, to see to it that the Minister for Magic should so tragically suffer this happy little accident.

But who?

The potential answers were too many. After all, a great deal may be done with Time-Turners such as these; a great number of people may be brought back.

Just then, Creighton noticed a crisp, white card propped up against his gas lamp, its message printed in a golden ink which seized and shimmered with the reflections of the light.

He narrowed his eyes suspiciously; he was certain that the card had not been there a minute ago.

He cast a glance about the study but found no sign of someone having been there, nor could he think of anyone who could have been. His wife, Ena, could be spotted outside, returning from her evening stroll; his daughter, Fiona, had not resided at Thornton in many years; his only living son, Felix, remained wasting his life away in Romania on a dragon reserve run by some similarly life-wasting Weasley; and, thanks to S.P.E.W., his house-elf had been snatched up almost a decade ago with the excuse of some unfathomable form of abuse.

Creighton sat forward and, gingerly, picked up the card. He adjusted his reading glasses.

Nottingham Hall.

Midnight.

You remember the attire.

His hands began to shake. With bated breath, he turned over the card to find some clue that might confirm that this was indeed what he hoped it was.

And a clue, he found.

The second he read it, it vanished, leaving the card blank on both sides and a fervent anticipation blooming within his chest. Indeed, glorious change was on the horizon. The wizarding world would right itself once more, one missing Mudblood at a time.

Imprinted against his brain, Creighton could see it still: the shimmery gold letters of that smooth, curling signature.

Lady M. Nott

Chapter End Notes

Finally, a little glimpse of 2020 … Thoughts? Predictions?

Golden Halo

Chapter Summary

> Her hair reminds me of a warm, safe place
> Where as a child I'd hide
> And pray for the thunder and the rain
> To quietly pass me by
> — Sweet Child O' Mine, Guns N' Roses

Chapter Notes

> CW: brief and vaguely disturbing discussion of kneecaps.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The morning edition of *The Daily Prophet* on the last Monday of August was delivered to Hermione, as usual, on her breakfast tray in the conservatory. Even now, when she laid eyes upon the front page, she half-expected to discover something terrible had happened overnight. When nothing ever had, there was no relief; rather, she felt that something was missing, yet to be uncovered.

She suspected this persistent fear had been exacerbated in recent months by the reliving of those memories of the war, as she gathered each one from the depths of her mind.

These days, the biggest news was merely that the wizarding world's foremost potions trading partners had gathered for a conference at the Headquarters of the International Confederation of Wizards. The article was paired with a collage of photographs, mostly of Tavaris and Professor Dumbledore, Supreme Mugwump, and whosever hand they had happened to shake. Once Hermione finished skimming it, she removed the front page of the paper and passed it to Theodore, so he could pore over the pictures of his father whilst he ate his porridge.

She had moved on to the Business Section when the rest of the morning post arrived, though it did not do so by means of Dinky or Goppy. Whenever Tavaris was away, her post had to go through someone else.

"Lord Malfoy to see you, Mistress," Goppy announced in a low croak, just seconds before the sharp *clicks* of a steel-bottomed walking-stick reached her ears.

Abraxas strode into the conservatory, clutching the handle of his walking-stick with its obnoxious silver serpent's head in one hand and a stack of unsealed letters in the other.

“G’mornin’, Abby,” Theodore said, through a mouthful of eggs.

“Swallow before you speak,” Hermione reminded him. She narrowed her eyes at Abraxas in suspicion. “So, you’ve come to deliver the post in person today. Any particular reason?”

Normally, he passed it along through the house-elves. Denials, too, were communicated in this fashion. Less than a week ago, she had written to Madam Zabini, inviting her and Blaise round at Theodore’s request to see the latter, and the letter had been returned, unsent, by Dobby, who had very apologetically explained, “Master Malfoy does not think Lady Nott should be left unsupervised with the murderess — just in case, Master Malfoy says, so Lady Nott does not think to conspire with the murderess.”

It was, admittedly, a reasonable excuse.

“There is an unusual amount to deliver today,” Abraxas said, taking the empty chair opposite her. “This is an accumulation from the weekend, in addition to this morning’s.”

Eyeing her shrewdly, he reached slowly over the tea service to hand her the stack of letters. With a slight frown, Hermione began to card through them, taking note of each sender.

“Your popularity appears to have increased since joining the Ladies’ Tea Society,” said Abraxas mildly.

“It appears you are correct.”

Directly following that first meeting, she had received plenty of post expressing gladness for her change of heart. Now, this gladness had progressed; many an invitation had arrived for her in the last few days.

The Selwyns were holding a supposedly “quaint” dinner party next week; Clovis Yaxley was inquiring as to when Tavaris would return so the Yaxleys, too, could have them for dinner, going as far as to mention how closely related the two families were, given that Tavaris’ mother had been a Yaxley (due to a wife-collecting grandfather, Clovis and her husband Beldon were technically Tavaris’ aunt and uncle, though he point-blank refused to acknowledge them as such); Lidwina Rowle was wondering whether Hermione might fancy joining her at the opera that coming Sunday; and both Ena Rosier and Sophronia Travers had asked her round for tea.

It seemed that in the weeks that had followed her conversation with Hermione in Creighton Rosier’s study at Thornton, Rohesia Selwyn had been filling in her closest confidants. What, exactly, she had told them remained unclear, but the point stood: Hermione’s plan was working.

She spread the letters out before herself on the table and gazed upon them in malicious satisfaction.

Poor souls, she thought. This decision was going to haunt them.

“You must have made quite the impression,” Abraxas drawled. There was a tinge of something vaguely suspicious in his tone of voice.

“Do not pretend to be unaware of what *impression* this lot has of me,” said Hermione. “Really, Abraxas, ignorance does not suit you.”

He gave her a cool smile.

“You misunderstand, Mione,” he told her patronisingly. “I am merely pointing out that they now appear to have been placed under the misguided impression that you are somehow *agreeable*.”

“What does agreeable mean?” asked Theodore.

“When said in reference to a particular person, it means that one tends to get on with everyone.”

“Because they agree with everything?”

“Essentially.”

He turned his head to give Abraxas a condescending smile that suggested he was being very dim. “You’re so silly, Abby,” he chortled. “Ma’s not *agreeable*.”

Abraxas snorted.

“Not in the least,” he replied, “yet she’s somehow managed to convince people that she is.”

“They must not be very per-teptive,” said Theodore smartly.

“Perceptive,” Hermione corrected automatically.

“No, they mustn’t,” agreed Abraxas, with an amused smirk.

Or perhaps Hermione was just a good liar.

She picked up the letter from Sophronia Travers, deciding she would start with her. It would make sense that she would be more amenable to befriending the younger generation of witches. Plus, Sophronia had come from a family full of followers and had married straight into another one, so she was sure to know a thing or two about their respective misdeeds.

Hermione wrote her back after breakfast with an inquiry about her upcoming availability, before she, Theodore, and Crookshanks headed off to Nottingham Hall for the day.

Midway through dinner the following evening, Tavaris returned home from his travels, looking simultaneously tired and tightly-wound. He was curt with Goppy, who had come to take his trunk, and he dropped his walking-stick whilst wrestling jerkily with his cloak, struggling to get it off one-handed.

The next moment, however, Theodore came slipping and sliding down the front hall in his socks to skid straight into him, and the clench of his jaw loosened enough to allow a small smile.

“Pa!” Theodore cried happily, hugging him about the legs.

“Not too tight, Theodore!” Hermione said quickly, coming up behind him. “Be careful of Pa’s bad leg.”

“It’s fine,” Tavaris muttered, which was quite the lie. Travelling by Portkey always made the injury flare up again. Nevertheless, he was smiling still, smoothing Theodore’s hair back and gazing down at him fondly, as though he could not be bothered by the unquestionable pain.

“You’ve made it just in time for pudding!”

“Is that so? Aren’t I lucky?”

“*So* lucky!” said Theodore emphatically, craning his neck to look up at him. “It’s treacle tart! We *never* have treacle tart! But I was really, really good this week so Ma said it was OK.”

Tavaris raised an amused eyebrow at her.

“He’s been requesting it for a while now,” said Hermione, crossing her arms over her chest. “I figured I would wait until you were here, since I’ll not be putting it on the menu again anytime soon.”

Regardless of how much time had passed since, after craving it every day for nine months, she still felt ill at the very smell of treacle tart.

“We didn’t want you to miss out!”

“That was very kind of you both. Thank you, darling,” Tavaris added to Hermione, as she helped him get his cloak the rest of the way off and handed it to Goppy.

“How was the return trip?” she asked, in a determinedly light voice, as she retrieved his walking-stick from the floor.

“Dumbledore sends his regards.”

She nodded her head once, tightly.

“That’s nice.”

“Who’s Dumbledore? Hogwarts Dumbledore?”

“The Headmaster of Hogwarts, yes,” she told Theodore, as she steered him back toward the informal dining room, Tavaris following close behind. “And it’s *Professor* Dumbledore, Theodore.”

“Oh. Lucius doesn’t like him.”

“Lucius can put a sock in it.”

“Oh. OK.” Theodore climbed back onto his chair, then looked across the table at her as she and Tavaris took their seats. Very generously, he offered, “Might you want to use one of my socks?”

“No, thank you, my love,” said Hermione primly, as Tavaris sniggered. “Keep your socks on, please.”

“Are you sure?” asked Theodore, reaching under the table, in all probability, for his socks. “I’ve got two of them. I can share.”

“Theodore,” she said sharply. “The socks stay on.”

To her relief, he brought his hands back above the table, just in time for Dinky to place a plate of treacle tart in front of him. Even from a distance, the sickly-sweet aroma made Hermione’s stomach churn. She picked up her goblet of wine and inhaled deeply to rid her nose of the scent.

Grinning in amusement still, Tavaris took a bite of his own treacle tart. As he chewed, he reached into his robes to take out a thin, brown case.

“Now, your souvenir is a little bit bigger, Theodore, so I shall have to get it out of my trunk after dinner,” he said, once he had swallowed, “but this one is for you, darling.”

He handed her the case. She put down her goblet to open it; inside, on a bed of inlaid fabric, was a shiny, black fountain pen.

“It doesn’t have any ink in it yet,” he told her, as she plucked it out of the case and turned it over carefully in her hands, studying the sharp, gold tip. “I know you use blue ink for your annotations, and I was unsure whether you would want to use this for that or not, so I’ve left it to you to decide.”

“What is it?” asked Theodore, leaning over the table curiously.

“A pen.”

Just a stupid pen. She hated how grateful she was to be gifted it.

“What’s a pen?”

“It’s a Muggle writing instrument, similar to a quill,” she explained, without looking up. “It’s a very nice one, too. Thank you, Tavaris.”

“A *Muggle* quill? And *you* picked it out, Pa?” Theodore sounded extremely sceptical. “All by yourself?”

“Not quite,” said Tavaris. “Dumbledore helped.”

Hermione looked up at that.

“It’s *P’ofessor* Dumbledore, Pa,” said Theodore reprovingly.

Tavaris ignored this.

“A translator had one,” he explained to Hermione, seeming, for the most part, calm. “We both found ourselves exceedingly bemused by it. I thought you would have liked to have one. Dumbledore bought one for himself, too.”

“*P’ofessor* Dumb—”

“I will call him whatever I please, thank you, Theodore.”

For the rest of the evening, Hermione was tense with anticipation. She did her best to act as though nothing were amiss, as the table was cleared and as Tavaris retrieved the souvenir for Theodore — a “big boy” broomstick from a small shop in Vienna that had been custom-made to suit his measurements. The whole time she helped him ready for bed, she listened distractedly as he talked about how Gaspar had apparently promised to teach him how to fly, seeing as “Pa can fly but he cannot run and chase me when *I* fly, since his bad leg and also since Aspa says he’s too old, so Aspa’s got to do it.” He had to kiss the broomstick goodnight before agreeing to get into bed.

Finally, Hermione was alone.

She ensured the doors were all closed before sitting down at her desk and laying out a bit of scrap parchment. Very carefully, she took out the new fountain pen, her heart beating frantically in her chest. After a moment of hesitation, she lowered the gold tip to the parchment.

Instantly, the pen leapt out of her hand and began to write of its own accord. Black ink flowed from the tip, belonging to another pen entirely. So, too, did the thin, slanted words it wrote.

Has all proceeded accordingly?

Hermione’s whole body slumped with relief.

She glanced quickly at her bedroom door, then at the one joining hers with the nursery; both remained shut. Nevertheless, she listened closely for any *thudding* in the hall, and only when she heard none did she then dig a bottle of blue ink out from her desk and fill the pen haphazardly with trembling hands. Holding her breath, she wrote her response: *Yes.*

After a few seconds, the pen removed itself from her grasp once more. The next question it scrawled, swiftly and decisively, was shorter; simpler. Or, it should have been.

Are you well?

Hot tears prickled at the corners of her eyes, filling them rapidly. She let the pen fall and lay on the parchment when it was done, rolling slightly before stopping flat.

How was Hermione meant to even begin answering such a loaded question as that?

She propped her elbows up on the desk and sank her hands into her hair, breathing shakily as she continued to stare at the words. She blinked, and a single teardrop landed on the question mark, smearing the black ink into a small, watery smudge. She sincerely hoped it would not transfer onto whatever page Professor Dumbledore was currently looking at, as he awaited her answer.

After a minute, she stood up to pace the room, her body restless with indecision. Her heart was pounding now, a firm, resounding *thump* against her chest, pleading with her to do nothing. Her brain disagreed, a little voice at the back of her head urging her to pick the pen back up and tell him the truth.

The voice sounded a lot like her own. In the past, however, it had not been saying this to her; it had been saying it to Harry. *You ought to tell Professor Dumbledore,* the voice said sternly. *He'll know what to do.*

But there was not anything to be done, in this case.

Hermione paced for another few minutes, drawing shuddering breaths and pulling tirelessly on her ring. Then, wiping her eyes, she sat back down at her desk.

In the end, she did not tell him. But she did warn him.

Shakily, she wrote: *Tavaris Nott is a widower.*

For over a minute, the pen did not move. She held it loosely in her hand and waited anxiously. Then Professor Dumbledore wrote back: *Do you know when?*

No, she replied hurriedly, sniffling. *Before September 1991.*

Do you know how?

No, she wrote again. She knew what he was likely thinking, though — the same thing that she had used to think, that this might mean she had returned to the future — so she added hastily, *My son will be able to see the Hogwarts Thestrals.*

The pen did not move again for even longer.

A small, childish hope blossomed within her. Maybe he was trying to think of a solution; maybe, just maybe, he would have an idea of how to help. If anyone could sort this problem out, it would be Professor Dumbledore.

At last, the pen lifted itself upright and began to move once more across the parchment, painstakingly slow and intent.

I am deeply sorry, Hermione.

She read the name, then reread it, then blinked rapidly and wiped her eyes on her sleeve to clear them and reread it again.

A four-year-old Muggle-born witch named Hermione Jean Granger had by now officially appeared in the Hogwarts Book of Names.

It would have been obvious, the second it had. The same date of birth would have been printed there, after all, just a different year. Professor Dumbledore had known her true age; he had only needed to count backwards. As soon as he had come across, *19 September 1979*, he would have known. Besides, if the Dark Lord had been able to figure out that she had been in Harry and Neville's year at school, there had been no doubt that Professor Dumbledore would have done as well.

Hermione could not stop looking at it.

That's me, she thought stupidly. *I'm Hermione.*

Carefully with one finger, not wanting to smudge the ink, she traced all nine letters: *H — e — r — m — i — o — n — e.* Silently, she mouthed it, cherishing the way her lips shaped around each of the four syllables: *Her—my—oh—knee*.

It had been many years since anyone had said this name to her, even in writing. Only once, in all this time, had she said it aloud herself, and that had been to Head Goblin Cogthorn.

Just then, she heard it: the *thudding* in the hall.

With haste, she leapt to her feet, shoved the pen to the back of a drawer, snatched up the parchment, and scurried into her bathroom, shutting the door behind herself.

She took one final look at the name, soaking up as much of the sight as she feasibly could, and then she lowered it to the lit chamberstick on the counter. Avidly, she watched the parchment blacken and curl, burning the name away. She dropped it in the sink and rinsed away the ashes.

"Mione, darling?"

She splashed cool water on her face, patting under her eyes, and took a deep breath.

"Just washing my face!" she called back.

The tiny *thuds* stopped somewhere in the middle of the bedroom, meaning he had probably sat down on her bed. She huffed quietly and began washing her face properly.

A few minutes later, she exited the bathroom. Sure enough, Tavaris had made himself comfortable on the right side of the bed. He had not gotten under the blankets, though, at least. Draped over his lap was a large lump of greyish brown fur.

Hermione stopped in her tracks.

"Is that another coat?" she asked warily.

"Aunt Adalaide sends her love," he replied, running an idle hand over the fur. "She recently bought one like this for herself and thought you might like to have one as well. I had mentioned to her that you've become quite taken with wearing them."

"That was kind of her. I suppose." Hermione approached the bed to take the coat from him. She held it up, frowning at the coarse texture. "This isn't mink."

"To be perfectly honest with you, darling, I haven't the foggiest fucking clue what animal that was," said Tavaris flippantly. "Perhaps someone finally got their hands on that chimaera."

She raised an eyebrow at him.

"You know full well this isn't the hide of a Chimaera, Tavaris."

"Perhaps a small bear?"

She rolled her eyes and went to hang it up in the wardrobe.

"I'm glad you got a chance to visit them, in any case."

"It was a surprisingly welcome reprieve. Well," he said, immediately reconsidering, "I was ambushed at the Austrian border, actually. But they treated me to lunch after, so I cannot complain."

"Yet …"

With a groan, he proceeded to complain.

"Terric and Harolyn's daughter is engaged to be wed, so not only was I ambushed by my *own* family, I was also ambushed by *his*, all because none of them can be bothered to travel *here* for me to sign off on the contract …"

Eventually, he moved on to complaining about the Director of the French Bureau of Coordination of International Magical Affairs (who had committed the egregious offense of sticking his nose up at milk in tea), whilst Hermione returned to the bathroom to dress for bed, listening to him with half an ear. Due to the sheer number of people with whom Tavaris had met over the past few weeks, he had not even started on Professor Dumbledore yet by the time she was climbing over his legs to reach the left side of the bed.

All the while, she gazed up at the poster on her wall and moved her lips soundlessly, again and again, around the name.

Hermione. Hermione. Hermione. Hermione. Hermione.

That night, she dreamt of this name issuing from Harry's mouth, all nine letters and all four syllables, as he went door to door with a team of Aurors to give the whole wretched lot of them the shock of their lives. According to Tavaris, when he had gotten up to use the loo in the middle of the night and had peered into the nursery to find her having snuck away to the armchair, she had been grinning in her sleep.

His birthday breakfast the next morning was, thankfully, a cheerful affair. The atmosphere at the table was brightened by Theodore's high spirits, and brightened significantly further when, just as they were finishing up, he sprung to his feet and led the way to the study, where Tavaris' gift awaited, just behind the desk. Theodore clambered onto the shiny oak, with its black leather padding, and began spinning himself round in demonstration, on the seat of the brand-new swivel chair.

"It's so you can move about even when you've got to sit still!" he explained, between squeals of excitement.

It was a job well done. Tavaris, who often grew restless in the time he spent sat at his desk, stayed put on the chair the whole rest of the morning, as he caught up with the dealings of the Wizengamot from his three-week absence. Dinner, too, proved a success. Despite the ongoing tension between Tavaris and Abraxas and the mere presence of Madam Zabini at Geoffrey's side, plus Abraxas' childish bitterness over Tavaris missing his own recent birthday, everyone comported themselves with perfect civility for the entirety of the evening. Hermione had spent weeks plotting with Evangeline to ensure it.

Over tea, the pair had brainstormed methods with which to best keep Tavaris, Abraxas, and Geoffrey on their best behaviour, lest the former's birthday was ruined altogether and he was left in a foul mood for Hermione to deal with later. She and Evangeline had concluded that if the three of them were determined to behave like little boys, they ought to just be treated like ones.

So, naturally, they invited their old Head of House.

"Happy birthday, m'boy!"

In an instant, Tavaris', Abraxas', and Geoffrey's heads all snapped round, and each of their mouths dropped open in shock.

Professor Slughorn stood at the threshold of the sitting room and let out a full-belly laugh that rocked him backwards onto his heels, his plum-coloured waistcoat practically bursting at the buttons.

"Surprise!" he cried cheerfully.

On their best behaviour, indeed. It seemed that all the lot of them needed was someone whom they were obligated to address as "sir," and they remained remarkably well-mannered. Even Gaspar managed to keep his jokes tame, in the presence of their collective old Head of House, and it was quite refreshing to see Lucius act humbled enough to show someone else a modicum of deference.

That Sunday, after obtaining Tavaris' flummoxed permission two days prior, Hermione set out resolutely for Scotland to take her afternoon tea with Sophronia Travers. She travelled there by way of Apparation, with rough coordinates and a detailed description of the area from the ghost of Diera Nott, who had been born a Travers herself and whom Hermione had scoured the woods for that morning, so as to let whichever of the Traverses were currently home catch a glimpse of her with a wand in her hand, before she tucked it into a pocket of her robes. With any luck, it would have a similar effect on them as it had Sophronia's mother, Rohesia Selwyn.

The ancestral home of the Travers family was situated between great, roving hills of dampened grass and protruding rock in the Inner Hebrides. The ever-ageing stone with which it had been constructed stood tall and formidable in some places, crumbling in others, and the gravel path that drove up to the large oak front doors was marked by shallow puddles and low, moss-topped stone walls which had once, perhaps, been a part of the building at large, now ruins kept in memory.

High upon the battlements, Carden Travers could be spotted mounting his broomstick. Hermione had to wonder whether he had intended to be seen by her or not. Surely, his sister-in-law had informed him that Hermione would be arriving at this time. Had he ensured that he would be poising to take flight when she did, so as to remind her of their conversation in June? *A good experience to cancel out the bad,* she recalled, scoffing to herself. Whatever he had been alluding to, it was most certainly not flying.

Noticing her, Carden raised a hand over his head and waved, before kicking off and shooting straight for the misty-blue sky.

Hermione paused her stride to watch him for a minute, awash with an acute sense of longing and nostalgia. She could have sworn she could almost make out the sprightly laughter of Rose, Hugo, and her nieces and nephews in the distance, as they flew circles about the orchard at the Burrow.

She squared her shoulders and strode onward. As she neared the entrance, the oak front doors heaved themselves open, grazing the gravel noisily as they did. Sophronia Travers stepped out, wearing a tartan shawl, to clasp Hermione's hands in greeting. Smiling pleasantly though she was, her dark eyes were sharpened like her mother's, adding to the overall crow-like impression her face, too, possessed.

"Welcome to Fort Carson, Lady Nott," she said genially. "I do hope finding the place did not prove itself too troublesome. As I said in my letter, you could have taken the Floo, if you would have preferred."

"I thought I could use a breath of fresh air," Hermione said.

“Scotland is good for that,” said Sophronia, nodding. “We had a house in London, you know — Eamon and I — but I hardly ever stay there anymore. I daresay I have fallen too much in love with Scotland. Besides, the London house is an awfully *unusual* place of residence. Please, come in,” she added, gesturing through the open doors.

Hermione followed her into the entrance hall. Her eyes swept swiftly over the tall stone walls, the high-beamed ceiling, and the richly-coloured rugs and tapestries before returning to Sophronia.

“Unusual?” she inquired. “In what way?”

“Well, the previous owner was Eamon’s great-uncle Thaddeus, whom I’ve been told was a particularly eccentric wizard,” Sophronia informed her amusedly, leading the way across the flagstone floor and into a corridor just off the hall. “I presume you are familiar with Dervish and Banges, the joke shop in Diagon Alley? He bought and ran it himself, sometime in the late-nineteenth century. Meanwhile, Thaddeus’s brother — Eamon’s grandfather Torquil — went on to serve as the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement!”

They started up a wide stone staircase lined with candle brackets.

“Remarkable, isn’t it, how differently two siblings can turn out …” Hermione mused at length, affecting a thoughtful smile.

Sophronia pursed her lips, making them look extra beaky.

“I know what you are getting at, Lady Nott. I regret to say that Aisling and I were incredibly close as girls,” she confessed heavily. “We were in the same year at Hogwarts, in fact — Aisling, Bellatrix Lestrange, and I. In hindsight, we should have taken better notice when she grew closer to Andromeda Black — or whatever her surname is now, I cannot be bothered to remember.”

“Tonks,” said Hermione, hoping her voice did not sound as frosty to Sophronia’s ears as it did to her own. “It’s Andromeda Tonks now.”

“Is that it?” Sophronia gave a small sigh. “To this day, I am confounded by what could have steered Aisling with such ruthless force onto a path so very different than Eamon and Carden. Although, to be fair,” she added, in an afterthought, “Walter McKinnon in his Quidditch robes was a sight to behold.”

Her eyes glittered with mirth. She gestured ahead.

“Just down here, I’d thought we might take our tea in the drawing room — no pompously opinionated portraits spying from the walls.”

“Wise,” remarked Hermione, returning Sophronia’s conspiratorial smile. “They are quite nosey sometimes, aren’t they?”

“I suppose they have nothing better to do.”

They rounded a corner and continued through the open doors of the drawing room. More tapestries and rugs decorated the space, alongside russet-brown drapes, low-cushioned sofas, and claw-footed armchairs. Tea service had already been laid out on a round table with a tartan tablecloth at the centre of the room.

"I am pleased you could make the time to join me today," Sophronia said, as they settled into their seats and laid cloth napkins over their laps. "To join any of us, for that matter, on any day. To quote Aurelia Parkinson — though I shudder to do so — 'The old hags have had us outnumbered for quite some time.'"

Hermione laughed lightly, reaching for the teapot nearest. Her hand was waved away.

"No, no, allow me. I wonder, Lady Nott," Sophronia continued carefully, pouring Hermione's cup, "may we speak candidly?"

"Conversation is often more efficient when one does," she replied.

Sophronia set the teapot down gently and moved on to pour her own cup, not looking up straight away.

"You have been a profound source of curiosity for many years now," she said eventually, shooting Hermione a speculative glance. "I know I do not only speak for myself when I say that. We all saw so little of you, yet we heard plenty. I do not believe the phrase 'Your reputation precedes you' has ever suited a person more."

Hermione lifted the strainer from her teacup and set it aside, inclining her head in acknowledgement. "I have indeed received that remark before," she said. From Aisling McKinnon, ironically.

She reached for the milk saucer, tipped a splash into her cup, and stirred soundlessly.

"I am sure you have," said Sophronia, taking the saucer next. Her next words were spoken delicately. "You know, in the beginning, I'd heard rumour that you were a *prisoner of war* … Frankly, it made sense at the time — how else would Nott manage to get himself such a pretty young thing for a wife?"

Hermione's laugh was genuine, albeit startled. She gave Sophronia a curious look.

"What do *you* suppose happened?" she asked.

As though she had been waiting for a question like this, Sophronia put the saucer down and sat forward, ignoring her tea and folding her arms atop the edge of the table.

"*I* suspect you really *were* taken from Hogwarts," she said, in a low voice, gazing at Hermione intensely, "but not as any prisoner … no … I suspect *he* saw something in you, something sensational. By his hand, you were plucked right out of the sea, and to the surprise of your fellow fishes, it turned out you get on twice as swimmingly on land."

For a moment, Hermione mulled this theory over, adding a spoonful of sugar to her tea. She then nodded decisively to herself; she could work with this.

“That lot have been called a lot of things over the years,” she said, somewhat belatedly, “but I do not believe they have ever been likened to fish until now.”

Sophronia snickered. She seemed to take Hermione’s amiability as a sign that it was safe to go on.

“It wouldn’t even be accurate to say that you rose quickly through his ranks. You were never positioned within his ranks at all, as far as I am aware, and then, suddenly, you had surpassed them. You stood above them all — literally, according to Eamon.”

“How do you mean?”

“He described this one revel to me,” she began, in a hushed voice, and Hermione felt her spine stiffen, knowing immediately what story was about to be told. “I believe it was the day Harry Potter was born. Eamon said there was a witch in a white cloak overlooking them all from the balcony, *standing at the Dark Lord’s side*. Mad-Eye Moody had been captured that day, and Eamon said it was certain to be his last. They had him suspended in mid-air … a fifty-foot fall below him … he would not survive the next hour, let alone till morning … but then that witch in the white cloak demanded that Moody be let down. And — he — *was*.”

She sat back, her expression full of significance.

“By all accounts, he should have died that day. The Dark Lord had already approved his execution, as soon as the desired information had been obtained. And yet, Moody was set free — just days later, I’d heard.”

Hermione sipped her tea slowly and carefully. It made perfect, terrible sense now, why they all seemed to think so highly of her. The Dark Lord had only let Moody live that day because, by her reaction, he had known Moody was not meant to die yet. The Death Eaters did not know this, though. To them, she had made a demand, and in an instant, the Dark Lord had gone back on his own word just to second it.

“How can you be certain that witch was me?” she asked curiously, setting her tea back down on its saucer.

“People recognised your voice,” said Sophronia at once. “It was all anyone could talk about for weeks. With the singular exception of Harry Potter, the second that the Dark Lord wanted someone dead, they were as good as. He wanted Moody dead more than he wanted most, but because *you* demanded it, Moody is still alive today to be employed by the Auror Office.”

“He is,” was all Hermione said.

Sophronia sat forward again, looking keen.

“Forgive my intrusiveness, but I must ask: is it true that you were the one to lure Sirius Black away from those ruffians of his?”

Hermione was taken aback.

“Is that what you believe?” she asked, her eyebrows rising.

“That is what everyone believes.”

She made a noise like she found this interesting. As beneficial as it might have been to her now, she could not have them go on believing this; in about a decade, the rest of the Dark Lord’s supporters would all know that Sirius had never been one of them.

“And here I’d thought it was just Walburga Black,” she said, after a moment. “She came to call on me a few months ago, to thank me for bringing her son home to her, at least in spirit.” She picked up her tea and took another small sip, letting the anticipation build. “She has been so —” she nearly said *fragile* before catching herself, “— volatile, you know, since the war. I did not have the heart to tell her that I was just as surprised as everyone else was to hear Sirius Black had been a spy.”

Now it was Sophronia’s turn to be taken aback.

“Truly?” she said, in astonishment. “I would have thought the Dark Lord had told you.”

“No one has ever been privy to everything the Dark Lord does, Mrs Travers,” said Hermione coolly.

“Of course not,” Sophronia hastened to agree.

“But I did know that the spy was someone whom the Potters considered a friend. That, and he made for a good pet rat.”

Her eyes widened in surprised amusement.

“Yes, such a clever pet,” she snickered. “*Ratting* out the Potters.”

Excellent, thought Hermione, pleased. *Now when she discovers it was Peter, she’ll look back on this and realise I knew all along.*

She shifted her attention to the offerings on the tea tower, all of which had likely been made fresh that day by the Traverses’ house-elf, Dizzy, who was another of S.P.E.W.’s permanent residents in the future and who had her artwork hanging all over headquarters. Dean Thomas had given her painting lessons when he had visited as a volunteer art tutor.

“I am sincerely grateful we got this chance to chat, Lady Nott,” said Sophronia, as she spread a dollop of clotted cream on a scone. “It has proved incredibly illuminating.”

“Indeed, it has,” said Hermione truthfully.

When Sophronia walked her out approximately an hour later, Carden was outside still, as though he had been waiting for her to reappear. He was sat on some of the stone ruins, polishing his broomstick — an old (though presently very new) Cleansweep Six. He looked up to watch Hermione approach, his eyes bright and his freckled forehead glistening with perspiration.

“Good flight?” she asked indifferently, stopping a metre away.

“Certainly enjoyable,” said Carden, with a boyish grin, “though it could have been better.” The *if you had joined me* was implied. “Good tea?” he added, raising an eyebrow.

“It could have been worse,” she said, letting him assume she was being sarcastic rather than taking a jab at his sister-in-law. “There were no attempts at tessomancy, at least.”

He sniggered.

“Might Divination be another item on the list of things of which you are not so much a fan?” he asked, and she gave an emphatic huff of annoyance. “A bad experience, I suppose, just as with flying …” He trailed off, an inquiring rise at the tail-end of his voice.

“You might call it that,” said Hermione, crossing her arms, “but, really, I have always been a sceptic.”

Carden gave a tiny nod, appearing thoughtful. He poured a bit of broomstick polish on a rag and refocused his gaze on the Cleansweep Six. The familiar, stringent smell of the polish permeating the air had Hermione inhaling deeply through her nose. Without even glancing at the bottle sitting on the ground by Carden’s feet, she knew it was the same polish that Ron had used. She practically drank it off the breeze.

“I hope Lady Rosier’s infinitely eager tea-leaf readings did not prove too dreadful an experience for you, in that case,” Carden said, working the rag over the handle of his broomstick until it gleamed.

The scent of the polish strengthened; Hermione felt dizzy from it. She blinked rapidly in an attempt to refocus.

“You heard about that, did you?”

“Destined for romance, was it?” he said, sounding nonchalant.

She studied him shrewdly, hesitating.

“Supposedly,” she admitted.

Carden sniggered again.

“What did Nott have to say about it when you told him?”

“I didn’t.”

At that, he lifted his head. His expression was pleasantly intrigued.

“No?”

She shook her head slowly.

Carden paused what he was doing and leaned back on the ruins to gaze up at her, squinting past the sun. He appeared to be twisting his lips against a smirk.

“Why, Lady Mione,” he said, in a low, mockingly scandalised voice, “you’re not keeping secrets from your husband now, are you?”

Hermione raised both her eyebrows.

“How dare you accuse me of such impropriety, Mr Travers.”

“You needn’t look so affronted,” said Carden, his eyes gleaming with roguery. “I daresay you take pleasure in a spot of impropriety.”

She looked at him a moment longer, measuring his demeanour, before uncrossing her arms, rolling her eyes, and turning pointedly away. “Good afternoon, Mr Travers,” she called over her shoulder, without looking back.

“It truly has been!” she heard him call after her.

As she strolled back toward her Apparation point just beyond the property line, Hermione wondered how much information she would be able to get out of Carden Travers whilst maintaining that one metre of distance. She felt certain that, so long as she played her cards right, she could have all sorts of things slipping past his grinning lips, and the audacious, murderous miscreant would probably enjoy every second of it.

The next two weeks breezed by through the steadily cooling air of impending autumn, marked by more correspondence with the witches of the Ladies’ Tea Society. Before she knew it, Hermione’s own birthday had arrived. The date came accompanied by a monstrous, six-layer cake with ghastly orange frosting and precisely twenty-five birthday candles that took four attempts and Theodore’s eager assistance to blow out.

It was no elaborate affair, involving no dinner party and no special guests, and yet, the stack of gifts sat crooked with a daunting, towering tilt to it. An eery number of people had sent something to her in the post. Even Tavaris seemed vaguely alarmed by it, and swiftly suspicious, upon watching Hermione unwrap a pearl-studded broach from the Selwyns, followed by a diamond tennis bracelet from the Traverses.

“They had absolutely no business buying you diamonds,” he muttered waspishly, as he glowered at the corresponding birthday card. “Jewellery is one thing, but *diamonds* …”

Hermione didn’t say anything.

“The cousins give Ma diamonds sometimes,” Theodore pointed out, looking puzzled.

“That is *quite* different. They are family.” Tavaris tossed the Traverses’ card aside with little care as to where it landed and looked at him severely. “There is only one person besides your mother for whom you shall ever be buying diamonds, Theodore — your *wife*.”

“Who’s my wife?” asked Theodore promptly. “Pansy?”

Hermione choked on her wine. Hastily, she pressed her napkin to her mouth to avoid any splatter, her eyes watering.

“Pansy Parkinson?” said Tavaris, in bemusement. His expression turned pensive.

“Th—that’s — that’s not — that is very far into the future, Theodore,” Hermione spluttered, between coughing fits. “Pa means your future wife, not — you don’t have one now.”

“Oh. Can Pansy be my wife in the future, then?”

She managed to draw a proper breath and immediately reached for her wine to down a large gulp.

“We shall see,” said Tavaris, with a finality that should have ended the conversation there.

It didn’t, of course.

“I only ask ‘cause Pansy would take good care of us,” Theodore carried on, very matter-of-factly. “I know ‘cause she’s not agreeable at *all* — just like Ma.”

Hermione choked again.

“If you keep talking about this, Theodore, you are going to give your poor mother a heart attack,” said Tavaris, picking up his own wine goblet. “Why don’t you give her the gift from you now?”

“OK.” Theodore threw her a glance as he hopped off his chair, adding, “Don’t have a heart attack, OK, Ma?”

She nodded, wheezing painfully.

Theodore’s gift turned out to be a drawing that he had done with coloured leads and that had been set grandly in an ornate gold picture frame. The drawing depicted some variation of stick people, with two big ones and one small one stood at the forefront, all three with dark brown hair. The biggest had what looked like an extra arm but was likely intended to be a walking-stick.

“It’s our family,” Theodore explained, clambering onto her lap. Once settled, he began identifying each of the stick people. “This one is me, right in between you and Pa — and, see, you and me are holding hands, and your mouth is open ‘cause you’re singing about our favourite things — those are the music notes, so everyone can tell.”

Not one person would be able to tell.

“And this is Crookshanks, since he’s orange,” he continued happily, pointing out a patch of colourful blobs in the bottom-left corner, which ranged from orange to blue to green. “He’s cuddling with Sho-So and Mr Dearborn and Mr Stubbs — that’s the green, see — and all the yellow ones over here are the Malfoys, ‘cause the white didn’t show up so I had to use yellow. And these other yellow ones are Eel-yeh and Aspa. Eel-yeh’s the one wearing pink, since she told me it’s her favourite colour.”

“This is extraordinary, my love,” said Hermione, feeling very warm, and not merely from the wine or the near asphyxiation. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” said Theodore, sounding deeply pleased.

Her eyes continued to rove over the drawing, a soft smile playing at her lips. Crowded in the top-right corner were six more stick-like blobs, these ones without any colour with which one might possibly be able to distinguish their identities.

“Who are they?” she asked, pointing.

“Just more family,” said Theodore flippantly, shrugging. When he turned his head to meet her gaze, however, he gave her a meaningful look.

Six blobs, one for each of the six uncles she had promised him. Although he did not yet know whom they were and, for even longer, would not know whom they were to him, Theodore had included Bill, Charlie, Percy, Fred, George, and Harry in a drawing of his family.

She thought her heart might just squeeze itself still.

“Oh, Theodore, my Theodore, how I love you so …” She drew him close and kissed his head. “I absolutely adore it, my love. I’m going to put it on my bedside table, front and centre.”

He beamed.

“Now, as for my gift …” Tavaris drew his wand and Summoned it; an envelope flew out from the bottom of the pile and landed on the table. He slid it toward her.

Keeping Theodore on her lap, Hermione picked up the envelope — which had, *To Mione*, written on the front in Tavaris’ sharp, lazy scrawl — and tore it open. Within, she found a slip of paper, which read:

Miss Carola Ebner

28B Knockturn Alley

Diagon Alley, London

She did not understand what she was looking at, not until Tavaris piped up to explain, watching her face intently.

“For years, you have spoken about getting a new wardrobe, one of clothes which you selected yourself, yet you’ve never actually done it. You seemed to have taken a liking to *her*, specifically, so I’d thought …” He trailed off, his expression inscrutable. He nodded to the paper and added, “You can write her there to arrange a time for her to come for a fitting.”

Hermione stared at him, her mouth hanging partly open.

“C—come? Come *here*?” she stammered, dumbstruck. “You — you will allow her to come *here* for a fitting?” *A Muggle-born?*

Tavaris inclined his head stiffly in confirmation.

“She will stick to your room and the lady’s parlour *only*,” he said firmly. “But … yes, she may come here. She has no premises, after all. I have already been to speak to her about it. She will be expecting your letter.” He paused, watching her closely still. “Are you pleased?”

Hermione nodded dumbly, still in shock.

“Thank you, Tavaris,” she murmured faintly.

“You are very welcome, darling.”

He leaned back in his chair and lifted his goblet to his smiling lips for a sip. Upon swallowing, he let out a satisfied sigh.

“I figured it was time, seeing as you’ve suddenly become *social*.”

“Yes, about that …” Hermione began haltingly, after a moment, tucking the paper back in the envelope and setting it aside. “I was actually thinking that I might … erm … start joining you at the Ministry’s annual Yule Gala again. I mean, if I were to do so,” she added hastily, when he only blinked at her, “you needn’t continue coming up with excuses for my absence.”

Tavaris stared at her blankly for a very long, very anxiety-inducing minute. Finally, he asked, quite randomly, “Need I call upon Lyall Lupin?”

Hermione’s heart missed a beat.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I fear I must,” he said, staring at her still. “He is a lead expert on spirits, and I am beginning to suspect that you are actively being possessed by a particularly extroverted one.”

She let out the breath that she had been holding.

“That … is entirely within the realm of possibility,” she said. “Would that be all right, though? If I were to attend with you?”

Tavaris’ gaze softened.

“As a matter of fact, darling, I would find myself incredibly glad if you did.”

She made a determined effort not to break his gaze too quickly.

To think, he never would have ordinarily allowed someone whom he knew to be Muggle-born to step foot here as anything but a captive, on the basis of blood alone. Such a grand gesture, it was, for him to have so generously agreed to allow one in now, all for her. It was meant to seem impressive — a selfless display of caring sacrifice.

It made her insides sizzle with indignance.

Remus, in blessedly predictable contrast, had bought her a pair of jeans for her birthday. The jeans could only ever be worn in and about his flat, of course, though he did not say this. They both knew it. Besides, they were having lunch in Jameson's pub when he handed them to her over the table in a brown paper bag, and Scurvlock and Skipper would have surely found it odd that she couldn't wear jeans at home.

Nevertheless, the gift made Hermione beam.

Remus watched closely as she held the jeans up by the waist to look them over in avid appreciation. It was the same style, the same cut, as the jeans her mother had worn when she had been a girl. "Saturday trousers," her mother had called them, apparently best used for walking to the grocer's or for puttering about the house, doing the washing, changing the linens, and opening cupboards in search of something that could be more efficiently organised.

Remus sat forward with his elbows on the table.

"It isn't much but —"

"It's *perfect*," Hermione told him, before he could say something upsettingly self-deprecating. "Truly, Remus, I adore them. *Thank you*."

"Well, good. You're welcome," he said, a small smile slowly growing on his face. He seemed to attempt to suppress it, at least a little, but could not quite manage. "Happy birthday, Mione."

Skipper heaved a great sigh beside her. She and Remus had sat at his and Scurvlock's usual table today, the one nearest the bar and the singular non-booth, which had just three chairs, leaving a designated gap for Skipper to park himself. He tilted his head back and gazed reminiscently at the ceiling.

"Twenty-five … I remember when I turned twenty-five …"

"I hope you will not hold it against us that we didn't get you anything," Scurvlock told Hermione, in a friendly tease, between sips from his foaming pint.

"Really stands out, that number," Skipper carried on wistfully, as a faint stream of smoke issued from the cigarette between his fingers. "I recall that was the year my mother wished me a happy birthday whilst she wiped my arse."

A startled noise escaped Hermione. She looked at him with wide eyes, unsure whether to laugh or be horrified. Remus experienced no such dilemma and sniggered into his pint.

"I do suspect that was not the first time your mother had done that, Skipper," Scurvlock pointed out, gazing at him wryly.

"Well, it was the first time in memory."

Hermione folded the jeans and stowed them away, remembering when she had first turned twenty-five years old, surrounded by an ever-growing number of guests at the Burrow, as year after year, several more Weasleys were born. That had been the birthday party that Teddy, in a spectacular show of accidental magic, had summoned her cake down the table and directly into his own face. She frowned at her half-eaten plate of fish and chips. Or perhaps that had been at her twenty-fourth.

"Sure, twenty-five was grim for the lot of us back then," Jameson chimed in, as he wiped down the bar with a fraying rag. "December the twelfth of 'thirty-six, 'twas for myself. Our boy Owen was well on the way, kickin' up a storm in his mam's belly. Put our gibberin' about another war brewin' on hold that week, so we did. Had a few wee remarks to make about that Wallis Simpson instead."

A long stream of mostly unintelligible words promptly emitted from the kitchen behind him, where Dierdre was working. Hermione heard what she thought sounded an awful lot like "talon-nailed floozie" but could make out little else.

"That's not hardly a thing," Skipper told Jameson dismissively. "Scurvyn Scurvlock here turned twenty-five out at sea, and the only birthday gifts he received were a nasty bout of scurvy and a new nickname."

"So that's how you got it," said Hermione wonderingly, looking at Scurvlock, as Remus bit down on his knuckles to smother a laugh.

"I'd considered myself lucky to have at least avoided a name so unfortunate as *Kneecaps*."

"Oh, Kneecaps!" Skipper cried, clutching at his heart dramatically. "The poor scrawny sod!"

"Says another poor scrawny sod," said Jameson, with a snort. He looked at Hermione and Remus. "Either of ye ever seen a fellow with sideways-pointin' kneecaps? A pair of concave skin sockets, I tell ye."

Hermione grimaced.

"He was the most talented watchdog you ever did meet," said Skipper. "One knee kept an eye out for ships in the west and the other for ships in the east."

Just then, Deirdre emerged from the kitchen carrying a plate of sticky-toffee pudding. She had one hand cupped to protect the flame of the birthday candle on top. Carefully, she rounded the bar and set the plate down in front of Hermione.

"Thank you, Mrs McCabe," Hermione said, glancing at her in surprise. "You needn't have done all this."

"I did not," Deirdre agreed bluntly. "I do not suppose it is quite so grand compared to what I'd imagine you might have gotten at home — you know, when you were celebratin' alongside your husband —"

"Deirdre," said Scurvlock quietly.

Ignoring him, she planted a hand on her hip and gestured to the sticky-toffee pudding.

“Go on, then, love,” she huffed. “Make a wish.”

Hermione turned and bowed her head, her face unpleasantly warm. She gazed silently at the small, flickering flame.

Once, she had blown out a candle and wished to see Ron again. A waste of breath, it now seemed. What did it matter, wasting herself on more wishes? None of her wishes ever came true. She never would see Ron again.

Eventually, she leaned forward, closed her eyes, and blew out the candle, thinking of nothing.

“I hope you did not go lookin’ out any windows Monday night before last,” Deirdre told her inanely, as she handed her a spoon. “If so, you can bet your wish will not be comin’ true.”

Scurvlock rolled his eyes behind her back, meanwhile Remus sighed.

“One wee glimpse of the full moon through a bit of glass and you will have gone and gotten yourself bad luck for a month,” she continued gravely. “I knew a man once who died from it.”

“If it had not been for his poor eyesight, he might still be alive today,” Jameson said, with a mournful shake of his great, grey-haired head. “Only glimpses he ever got of anythin’ was through a bit of glass.”

“Dealt a brutal hand, so Kenny was.”

Instantly, Hermione thought of Ron’s uncle Bilius, who had allegedly seen a Grim and died within twenty-four hours later. He had also reportedly pulled bunches of flowers out of his bottom as a party trick.

“We certainly are a merry lot, aren’t we?” said Skipper sarcastically, as Scurvlock adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses with humour. “What a way to celebrate a young lady’s birthday, waffling on about war, divorcées, and dead fellows called Kneecaps and Kenny.”

“I had a friend once who we all called *Wormy*,” Remus put in.

Skipper pointed at him with his cigarette.

“That’s worse.”

Scurvlock, meanwhile, appeared thoughtful.

“I believe I remember him,” he said, frowning slightly. “He was the quiet one. Rather twitchy, if I recall.” He turned to Remus curiously. “Whatever happened to him?”

Hermione treaded on Scurvlock’s foot under the table. She gave him a subtle shake of her head.

“You know who I’d been fond of?” Jameson piped up. “That chancer with the motorbike.” He chortled ruefully. “A riot, that one.”

Deirdre scoffed loudly, as though exasperated by the mere memory of Sirius Black ever stepping foot in her pub.

“A riot,” Remus repeated, in a cool voice. “Yes. He was that.”

In an act of desperation, Hermione picked up the spoon and began hurriedly shovelling sticky-toffee pudding into her mouth.

“This is just delicious, Mrs McCabe, I must know your secret,” she said, very fast, before she had even finished swallowing. “Honestly, it’s quite possibly the best sticky-toffee pudding I’ve ever had, you’re clearly very talented, I would simply love to learn your recipe — Remus, try some, won’t you?” She held a spoonful out to him.

This turned out to be a more than sufficient method of distraction, because rather than take it from her, Remus folded his arms atop the table and leaned over to eat the pudding right off her spoon. The second he started licking the caramel from his lips, Deirdre turned on the spot and marched straight back into the kitchen, muttering disapprovingly under her breath about “scarlet women” and “the bloody English.”

A short while later, Hermione and Remus had finished the last of their meals, cleared the plate of sticky-toffee pudding, drained their pints, argued over who was to pay (Hermione lost, seeing as it had been for her birthday), and left the pub for the flat above. Whilst he put the kettle on, she went into the bedroom to try on the jeans.

The denim felt unexpectedly strange against her skin, as she drew it up her legs; it was almost unfamiliar in its texture, its weight, rougher and heavier than she was used to, and in its snug fit at her thighs, as though jeans were a recent invention that she was just now discovering. She wished there were a mirror in the bedroom, so she might see for herself that they did not look as odd as they felt on her body.

She glanced in dismay at the long, blue linen skirt draped over the chair in the corner; one of the many items in her wardrobe that had been picked out by Narcissa prior to her arrival at the Nott Estate. Six years was not so great a time, in the grand scheme of things, Hermione told herself. How could she have forgotten what it felt like to wear trousers?

Well, knives lost their familiarity, too, for a while, she thought glumly, tucking the hem of her blouse into the waistband. She paused, reconsidering, and untucked it again. How had her mother worn them? Had her blouse been tucked or untucked? Hermione struggled to remember.

Just outside the room, she could hear Remus fiddling with the record-player. A second later, the riotous rumbling of his new The English Beat record came drifting under the door.

“*Mirror in the bathroom, please talk free*

The door is locked, just you and me …”

“Do they fit all right?” he called out over the music.

Hermione huffed at herself, tucked her blouse in once more, and went to open the door. She stood at the threshold and attempted a smile.

“Better than I’d expected, considering you had to guess at the size.”

Remus was crouched in front of the record-player beside the television, still holding the sleeve of his The English Beat record in his hands; in bold lettering above a line of silhouettes on the front was the album title: *I JUST CAN’T STOP IT*. Without looking at what he was doing, he slid it onto the shelf in front of him, leaving it untidily atop all his other records. His eyes started low and took a long while to reach her face.

“I did a lot of this,” he explained, a bit belatedly, spreading his hands apart and closing them slightly, widening and shrinking the gap. “The girl at the shop was kind enough to abstain from laughing at me — much.”

He got to his feet and looked at her hopefully.

“Do you like them, then?”

“I do,” said Hermione quickly, running her hands along the denim. She tried not to shift her weight. “It — it does feel slightly strange, though, wearing trousers after all this time.”

“You’ll get used to it again,” said Remus confidently, just as the kettle sounded shrilly from the kitchen. He did not move straight away. “They look good on you. Or you look good in them, rather.”

Her smile was small but genuine, flattered. “Thank you.”

“I mean, you look good no matter what you’re wearing, really,” he amended, and it was such a wicked thing for one to say, so casually and without warning, directly before walking out of a room.

It afforded her face the opportunity to cool down, at least. When she was sure that she had stopped blushing, she followed him into the kitchen. She leaned back against the wall and watched him retrieve the sugar jar from a cupboard above. The hem of his jumper rode up his back slightly as he reached for it.

After a moment, she realised that she was staring, and worse, biting her lip whilst she did so. Hastily, she looked away, before he could turn round and catch her in the act.

On the table beside her, the *Prophet* laid open to an article concerning the latest Bill put forth by Umbridge. Hermione could just make out the printed title within the first paragraph: *The Pure-Blood Protection Act*. From what she had heard, a lot of people were making noise about the name, including Arthur Weasley. The content itself, however, was going largely unprotested.

When — not if — the Bill was passed, it would ensure that any marriage between a pure-blood witch or wizard and a lengthy list of creatures would not be recognised under

wizarding law. Among the explicitly named were goblins, elves, giants, centaurs, hags, vampires, and, of course, werewolves. The only reason Bill and Fleur's marriage had been recognised was that it included nothing about those who were only part-Veela. Remus and Nymphadora Tonks, on the other hand, had been allowed to marry solely because neither of them were pure bloods.

The *Prophet* had published a secondary article on the matter; an unsurprisingly intrusive piece by Rita Skeeter that speculated on the parentage of Professor Filius Flitwick and wondered at "*how he must feeling in the wake of this bold new legislature.*" Professor Flitwick had, like any sane person, "*declined comment*."

Hermione had not been able to overturn it all at once; she had been forced to fight instead for small amendments to be made to the Bill over the span of two decades, removing one creature from the list at a time. Half of it was still in place in 2020.

"I take it you've seen that already?"

She did not look up, not finished glowering at the article. "She uses the term *half-breed* eighteen different times," she said, in disgust.

"That many?" said Remus, sounding faintly surprised.

"Oh, yes, it's simply her favourite term in the entire English language," Hermione said scathingly, "the garishly self-important, sickly-smiling, rotten little *toad*."

She tore her eyes from the paper. He still had his back to her and was now adding milk to each of their mugs. Perhaps he had glanced over his shoulder, then, or else had sensed her fuming behind him and guessed accurately what she had been looking at.

"The fact that the Bill only addresses any marriage involving a *pure blood* speaks volumes of a level of assumed superiority that is frankly just as astonishing as it is appalling," she said, crossing her arms, as he finally turned, tea in hand. She followed him into the living area. "Their concern is hardly about the so-called mixing of magical blood, though that's what they claim. In reality, all they care about is the ever so abhorrent risk of winding up with a supposedly *tainted* bloodline." She tossed her hands up wildly. "As if their bloodlines are not already tainted by a plethora of their own cousins marrying onto different branches of the same bloody tree! Honestly, it's a wonder the decay hasn't set in yet! Well," she added, and then she winced, because this was not the time nor place to start talking about the sanity of the Black family.

Remus set their mugs down on the coffee table and lowered himself, knees *cracking* slightly, onto the sofa. The next song on the track had started playing, loud in all its lively cranking.

"*Said hands off she's mine*

Hands off she's mine

Hands off she's mine,

Until the end of time …"

"Tavaris let me read his copy of the Bill before it went public," she resumed spitefully, falling onto the sagging cushions next to him. "I suspect he was attempting to prevent what he predicted would be a volcanic reaction at the breakfast table when the post came. Honestly, he did such a *splendid* job at pretending he's not currently incandescent with glee."

"He would be, wouldn't he?" muttered Remus, picking up his tea.

"*Obviously*."

Because Tavaris believed her a pure blood.

Hermione scoffed to herself and reached for her own cup of tea, which would hopefully calm her down somewhat. She sat back to sip it, one leg bending, automatically, to put her foot up on the sofa cushion.

After a moment, she noticed Remus watching her. Despite the subject of conversation, he was grinning.

"What is it?" she asked, with unnecessary sharpness.

He shook his head to himself, grinning still.

"You just seem very much like yourself today."

Hermione raised a disbelieving eyebrow.

"Because I'm all riled up?"

"Because you are uncontrollably so," he said clearly. He took a sip of tea and, jokingly, added, "I suspect it's the trousers' doing."

She felt a laugh bubbling up in her chest, bright and warm. Pressing her lips together, she smiled down at her tea.

"Do prefer me when I'm uncontrollable?" she asked teasingly.

"You *are* uncontrollable," said Remus. "I prefer you when you act like it."

At this, Hermione had to take a very deep breath, for she feared that her chest might just burst open, otherwise. The laugh waiting inside of her escaped on the exhale, though she did not think the sound had anything to do with amusement by the time it left her. Bright and warm, easily mistakable for mirth, but this feeling was not that.

Remus let his legs fall open, so one knee would rest against her own. The moment stretched and the music rambled on, and she stayed still, smiling into her tea. Only, it was not a smile, not really.

"*I've never been one for the punch-ups*

But look I really hate them Nazis …"

Uncontrollable, Hermione thought with relish, licking her smirking lips. She quite fancied the sound of that.

*

Autumn had officially arrived in a whirl of whistling wind, its spiralling leaves left wet and sticking to the ground. It was on an unusually sunny Sunday afternoon after a week of cool, drizzling showers that Miss Ebner came to the Nott Estate for Hermione's first fitting.

Hermione led her to the lady's parlour, where she had arranged for Goppy to serve them tea, as he and Dinky both would have done, without being asked, had it been any other guest. Even still, what laid waiting was not the same hand-painted chinaware that had been used when Walburga Black had come calling.

"I will be honest, Mrs Nott, it was a surprise to me when your husband came to Rosa Lee Teabag to speak to me about this," Miss Ebner said as, at a gesture from Hermione, she seated herself on the plush, royal-blue sofa. "But I was very glad. I *am* very glad — to be doing this for you."

"The feeling is mutual, Miss Ebner," Hermione said, as she sat forward to pour their tea. "I realise that I am asking a lot of you — a whole new wardrobe, I can't even imagine how much work must go into that — and I want you to know you needn't worry about any of the expenses — buying fabric and what have you — because Tavaris has agreed to negotiate an advance that will cover them."

"That is kind." Miss Ebner smiled, small and tight and teeming with emotion. "Thank you."

"No thanks are necessary. Now, how do you take your tea?"

Hermione did not let her serve any of it; she fixed a cup with two spoonfuls of sugar, handed it over carefully, and waited to see if it was to Miss Ebner's tastes before proceeding to fix her own.

"So, I'm afraid it's not only a new wardrobe I'll be needing," she said a minute later, after they had each taken their first few sips. She returned her teacup to its saucer and stood to retrieve a small scroll from a nearby end table. "I will also require a gown for this year's Yule Gala."

She handed the scroll to her. Miss Ebner unravelled it to read the gold-bordered invitation, which had come in the post earlier that week.

The annual gala was to be hosted this year by Floo-Pow — a company which served as the only licenced producer of Floo powder in Britain and which was headquartered in Diagon Alley and particularly well-known for never once opening its doors, no matter who knocked or how determinedly they did so. There had been much speculation from the *Prophet* over the last few days about how the Ministry of Magic had managed to speak to them, let alone

obtained their agreement to host. More than once, the witches and wizards at Floo-Pow had been likened to Unspeakables.

The event was to be held at the Bard Theatre of Enchanting Dramatics, so it was likely that Floo-Pow was betting on everyone being too distracted by all the theatrical performance to notice none of them were in attendance. All the proceeds would be going toward St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries.

"This will not be a problem for me," Miss Ebner assured Hermione, appearing as though she were attempting to smother her excitement. "What will you prefer me to start with? I did prepare some ideas for you today, for your wardrobe, if you wish to see them first?"

She had brought with her a large leather padfolio, which, at Hermione's nod, she now laid on the painted coffee table, next to the tea service, and opened to reveal pages upon pages of her own sketched designs. Hermione sat back down to flip through them.

The sketches included an array of robes, dresses, skirts, blouses, and cloaks, often paired with accessories like scarves or hats or sleek, low-heeled boots. Many of them reminded her of some of the more polished styles she had seen modelled in Muggle fashion magazines when she had been growing up. It recalled, specifically, those Chanel pantsuits, with their ornate buttons, square pockets, trim lines, and crisply-hemmed skirts, worn by women whose necks were adorned with pearls, cutting lean, slinking, and powerful figures in full-page, glossy images of stark background and sharp edges.

After several minutes of poring over the sketches, Hermione raised her head to look at Miss Ebner in amazement.

"Are these all your own designs?" she asked incredulously.

Miss Ebner lowered her tea and shifted rather sheepishly on the sofa. "Yes, Mrs Nott. But my inspiration comes from watching one of my aunts when I was a girl," she explained. "She used to dress the wives of politicians."

"These are absolutely wonderful," Hermione told her emphatically, gesturing to the sketches. "*Truly*. I love all of this."

Miss Ebner gave a bashful nod of thanks.

Just then, out of the corner of her eye, Hermione spotted Theodore hovering at the threshold of the parlour.

There was a curious expression on his face as he gazed at Miss Ebner from afar, his head just poking out from behind the wall. Dinky was teetering on the tips of their toes next to him, looking as though they were at war with themselves. Perhaps they were debating dragging him back to the nursery. Hermione did not give them the chance to do so; she waved a hand and called Theodore over. Apprehensively, he entered and approached her side, never once looking away from Miss Ebner.

“Theodore, my love, this is Miss Ebner,” Hermione said, in a gentle voice. She placed a hand on his shoulder. “What do you say?”

“How do you do?” he asked timidly.

Miss Ebner smiled at him kindly.

“I am well, thank you, Mr Nott,” she said warmly. “And yourself?”

“I’m well, too, thanks.” Theodore shot an uncertain glance at Hermione, who nodded encouragingly. Looking back at Miss Ebner, he added, in a tentative inquiry, “Do you eat porridge?”

Miss Ebner appeared just as taken aback as Hermione felt.

“I do,” she said, after a second.

“Your parents are Muggles, right?” he asked, and she nodded haltingly. “Ma says they eat porridge, too. They invented it, you know — right, Ma?”

“That’s right, my love,” said Hermione, with a small burst of pride.

“Muggles invented a lot of things,” Theodore informed Miss Ebner smartly, standing up straighter, “even though they don’t have any magic. *That’s* how clever they are.” Quizzically, he added, “Do you know about elec-ticity?”

“I do,” said Miss Ebner, gazing at him with bright eyes.

“It’s pronounced *electricity*, my love.”

“*Ee—lec—tricity*!”

Hermione smiled at him fondly, nodding, and smoothed his hair back out of his face. The thin, brown strands were awash with the mid-afternoon light flooding into the parlour from the floor-length windows. It brought a warm shine to his hair, highlighting the very lightest of it.

Her heart gave a sudden stutter.

The usual darkness that enveloped his head — a brown so near black — was abruptly illuminated before her widening eyes, creating an almost golden glow, which clung brightly to a single, curling strand that fell onto his forehead.

Her breath caught in her chest. She was unable to tear her eyes away, even for a second.

She could not fathom how she had not seen it until now. Perhaps it was owed in part to the shadowy interior of the house, she speculated, or because she saw him every day, so the miniscule changes that occurred over time were unnoticeable whenever they cropped up. It was after those changes had added up that, altogether, one could see them for what they were.

She never noticed when he had grown a few centimetres, after all; only when he had already gained an inch did it strike her, painfully, that he was not so small anymore.

It was not bushy, by any means, and its curls were only half-formed. Nevertheless, this was not Tavaris' hair; that smooth, near black. It was not the hair of Mione Nott, either; that bitter shade of brown that had been forged by the Elder Wand to grow, even seven years later, the same colour, with the same lack of wave.

This was the hair of Hermione Granger. A golden halo in the sunlight, adorning the head of her son.

*

The ghoulish, green glow of the dark, damp dungeon encompassed the quiet of the Slytherin common room. On account of the late hour, not even the creatures lurking in the depths of the Black Lake could be glimpsed out the windows, no trace of sunlight left to seep down through the rippling waters. Only the light of the roaring hearth offered a modicum of warmth; it cast a flickering gleam against the black leather of the chesterfield sofa on which Theo reclined, his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* by Libatius Borage open on his lap.

He stared in consternation at page ten: the recipe for the Draught of Living Death. It was terribly oversimplified for such a complex potion, so it was no wonder that so many corrections had been made between the lines. At the sixth step, for instance, it was noted in blue ink that he ought to *add a clockwise stir after every seventh counterclockwise stir*. Whilst brewing it in class almost two months ago now, Theo had followed the blue-inked instructions to a tee, and yet, inexplicably, his potion had not turned out. Even more inexplicably, Harry Potter's had, and Potter had gotten himself a bit of bottled luck out of it.

Theo could have used a spot of luck himself.

A door opened nearby — the girls' dormitories, Theo thought, as soft footsteps approached, stopping just behind the back of the chesterfield.

"Has he come back yet?"

He held back a sigh.

"No."

Pansy made a small noise that was half-frustrated and half-anxious. From the sound alone, he knew she had her arms crossed. Sure enough, when she rounded the chesterfield a moment later, wearing a purple dressing gown and matching slippers, she unfolded her arms to swat at his socked feet. He bent his legs to make room for her to sit.

"He's barely said a word to me all week," she muttered sullenly, crossing her arms again. "It's as if I don't even *exist* to him anymore."

Theo had only the most uncomforting things to say about that, so he chose to say nothing and returned his gaze to his book.

Ma's corrections could not have been wrong. Dismayed, he frowned hard at the fifth step, which said to make a small cut to the Sopophorous Bean, by which its juice could be squeezed out directly into the brew. Ma had made no corrections to this step. This must have been wherein the error laid, then, he thought; some tiny detail that had slipped her mind.

"… not as though I'm demanding he tells me what it is he's doing," Pansy went on peevishly, "and even if I did, does he think I'd somehow be daft enough interfere? All I did was say I'm worried about him, and the way he reacted, you'd think it were the most monstrous crime …"

Perhaps one had to dice the Sopophorous Bean, not make a mere cut. But this would defeat the purpose; dicing would not help one squeeze the juice out into the brew, just make a mess of the workstation. Perhaps it ought to be crushed, not cut.

"… must be important, otherwise he wouldn't be in such a state about it, and he is, clearly, anyone can see it. I mean, what if he's in trouble? You haven't heard anything, have you?"

It took a second for Theo to register that this question had been directed at him, even though they were the only two people in the common room. Reluctantly, he lifted his gaze from his book.

Pansy was gazing at him with a pinched, worried expression.

"Surely, you have," she insisted. "You heard about Tracey's father, didn't you?"

"Mr Davis was involved in a very public protest in the 'seventies," said Theo, keeping his voice low. "That's hardly classified information. It's not even unique."

"He was only an emcee at that event, though, wasn't he?" said Pansy, twisting toward him and lowering her own voice. "It's not as though he performed any of the Muggle songs himself."

"It won't matter."

"You scared Tracey half to death, you know," she said, levelling him a significant look. "You could've at least gone about it a bit gentler. Practically dragged her to Snape's office to drop the class, didn't you?"

"It was necessary," muttered Theo, though he felt a twinge of guilt. "She wouldn't listen. I understand she signed up for the class to feel closer to her mother and all, but that's precisely it — she's already a half-blood. She cannot afford to be a half-blood in Muggle Studies at the moment."

"Because you wouldn't be able to look out for her if she were?"

He didn't say anything.

Just then, the sound of a metal door scraping against flagstone alerted them to someone entering the common room from the corridor beyond. In an instant, both their heads jerked toward the entrance.

Draco stopped in his tracks. He was still in uniform, though his tie had been loosened and his collar was uncharacteristically crooked. His eyes darted between the two of them, alight with a cagy glint.

“Why are you awake?” he asked Theo jerkily.

“To make you uncomfortable when you got in,” said Theo honestly.

Draco scoffed in agitated disbelief. He let the door swing shut behind him and cut a swift path across the common room.

“Draco —”

“Merlin, Pansy, drop it already, would you?” he snapped, not sparing her a glance. “What I do is hardly any of your business. Do yourself a favour and try to remember that.”

Theo put his book down and sat up, planting his feet on the floor.

“Watch your tone, Malfoy,” he said coldly.

“Piss off, Nott.”

Without another word, Draco yanked open the door to the boys’ dormitories and disappeared down the dim corridor.

Pansy slumped back on the sofa, hugging herself and staring at the closed door. Theo hoped desperately that she was not about to cry; he wouldn’t know what to do if she did.

“He won’t let me take care of him,” she said, after a moment, in a distinctly tearful voice.

“He thinks he can take care of himself,” said Theo, sighing heavily. “That’s hardly your fault.”

Tiredly, he slumped back, stretching out his legs. He picked up *Advanced Potion-Making*, then let out another sigh and closed it again before bothering to relocate his page. It was for the best that he hadn’t won that bottle of Felix Felicis. He would have probably very rapidly developed an addiction. Or worse, someone would have heard that he had won it and wanted to use that luck for themselves.

After a moment, he sensed Pansy looking at him, and after another moment, he could no longer ignore it; he put his book aside once more and turned his head to meet her gaze — a combination of soft and searching that was entirely foreign to him.

“Would *you* let me take care of you, Theo?” she asked, very quietly.

Theo’s mouth went dry. He abruptly felt too big for his body.

For the first time, at that moment, he wondered if perhaps her distress was not solely about Draco’s well-being, after all. Perhaps Pansy’s desire, at its core, was simply to be needed.

“What would that entail, exactly?” he inquired, and, overwhelmed by the possibility of her actually responding to this, he added jokingly, “not tossing out all my socks, I hope.”

Pansy gave a light scoff; he could not decipher whether it was a good noise or a bad one. She broke his gaze to glance down at his socked feet. His current pair were bumblebee striped.

“I would be well within my right to do so,” she said, with a haughtiness made unconvincing by the sudden high pitch of her voice. She sniffed sharply and wiped under her eyes. “Really, Theo, they’re atrocious, I’d be embarrassed to be seen with you if they weren’t usually covered.”

“So you’ve said before.”

“It’s even worse you got them from Gladrags,” she continued in that same tone, sinking lower on the sofa and draping one leg over the other, “because you did, didn’t you, and that you went in there in the first place is an embarrassment all on its own.”

“I haven’t bought any of the singing ones, at least,” he pointed out.

“*Yet*,” said Pansy archly.

Theo didn’t think he was smiling, but his face was definitely doing something. Had she not still been looking away from him, he would have needed to look away himself.

Distantly, he thought that he should have been insulted, or hurt, because he was so obviously a second choice. But being a second choice could still mean being chosen. And perhaps, if he was honest with himself, whilst Pansy might have wanted to be needed, a not-so-small part of him simply wanted to be wanted. It was a logical solution, in this case; mutually beneficial.

He licked his lips.

“I suppose,” he said gingerly, “I could survive a ban on Gladrags.”

Pansy became quite still. Even now, her eyes were fixed on her one dangling foot.

“You could?”

“I mean, if you tell me where I ought to buy my socks instead.” Purposefully, he added, “I’d imagine you know more about these things than I do.”

Pansy nodded perfunctorily. “I do, yes.” Then, startling him, she sat up straight, faced him, and added coolly, “The lighting down here does you no favours, you know.”

Theo, very determinedly, did not laugh at her for the abrupt change of subject.

“Thank you for that observation, Pansy.”

“Well, it’s true, the green undertones really don’t suit you,” she drawled, as if nothing remarkable had happened. “Honestly, Theo, you look dreadfully pale, almost ill, and your

hair …" Without warning, she reached out and dragged her pink-painted fingernails through his hair.

Theo's chest tightened painfully. To his horror, a prickling heat pressed behind his eyes. He could not recall the last time someone had fixed his hair. It had probably been his mother.

"It looks practically dead in this lighting," Pansy went on, smoothing it back off his forehead. "You can't even see the golden hues."

Chapter End Notes

I confess, this chapter could've been out a month ago, but it originally included a bunch of anecdotes about potions trade and MACUSA and, frankly, I'd been sick to my stomach just looking at it ever since a shrivelled, fuzzy-white-mould-topped bit of old orange peel decided to give a trade war a go and that my country ought to be a fifty-first fucking state.
But I digress. Sorry.

Moody Murderer

Chapter Summary

> Look inside, look inside your tiny mind
> Then look a bit harder
> ‘Cause we’re so uninspired, so sick and tired
> Of all the hatred you harbour
> So you say it’s not okay to be gay
> Well, I think you’re just evil
> You’re just some racist who can’t tie my laces
> Your point of view is medieval
> Fuck you (Fuck you), fuck you very, very much
> — Fuck You, Lily Allen

Chapter Notes

> CW: audacity (of a minor character), brief homophobia, and I wish there were a nicer way to put it but, implied (past) attempted child molestation (minor characters only).

If Hermione had thought she had received a lot of gifts for her birthday, it was nothing compared to what was showered upon Theodore.

Clothes, books, stuffed animals, a self-operating trainset, numerous joke-shop products, several wizard’s hats, monogrammed stationary and an eagle-feather quill, and even a Cleansweep Six, which Lachlan Travers assured he would grow into in no time at all.

“He will be tall like his father,” Lachlan said confidently.

This was true, regardless of whether Lachlan was referring to Tavaris when he said “father” or not. Likely thinking something along these lines himself, Tavaris’ expression darkened, his jaw clenching tightly. Thankfully, Abraxas cottoned on before he could grow too tense; he clapped Tavaris on the back and loudly joked about how he had been the smallest of their group until, suddenly and much to their collective surprise, in the span of a single summer, he had shot up to tower over them all.

“We shall have to tuck it away until then,” Hermione told Lachlan, taking the Cleansweep Six and propping it up near the gift table. “Tavaris actually just got him his first proper broomstick a couple of months ago, whilst he was in Austria. It was custom made to fit him,

even Charmed to rise no higher than a metre above his own height — see, he's on it now, just over there," she added, pointing Theodore out in the distance.

He had just succeeded in knocking a glass of sherry out of the hand of Creighton Rosier; the fizzling, pink liquid sloshed all down Creighton's front, staining his cornflower-blue dress robes, and even managed to spray Wymond Selwyn beside him. The pair nearly erupted with outrage before they realised just which child it had been and wisely laughed it off instead. The latter even complimented Theodore on his flying.

"He is a perfect natural," Lachlan remarked smoothly.

Hermione smiled. Truthfully, Theodore just liked crashing into things — like Gaspar and Lucius, and on one memorable occasion, a woefully unprepared Cygnus Black.

She took a small sip from her champagne flute and looked back out across the Great Hall. Flying alongside Theodore was Gaspar, whom she had made promise to supervise him the whole time he was in the air. Gaspar was currently steering one-handedly, so as to drink deeply from a champagne flute in his other hand. Somehow, he was also managing to keep an arm around Pansy on his lap. To Hermione's dismay, Carden Travers and his own Cleansweep Six were in Theodore's midst as well. Carden appeared to now be teaching Theodore how to spin in a circle to make himself dizzy, much to the latter's obvious delight.

It had been Hermione's hope that this party would be small, just the members of pure-blood wizarding society who had young children themselves, but Theodore had pleaded to have one bigger and better than Draco's in June, so that he could rub it in Draco's face. Even after her lengthy lecture on the importance of humility, Theodore had stood his ground, pointing out that Draco was in far greater need of being humbled than himself, so it was really for Draco's own good that he had a bigger birthday party. She had eventually caved, not because his logic was sound (though it was), but because when it came to birthday parties, Theodore was only able to attend so many. He had cried all night when he had been told he could not attend Pansy's in October. The Parkinsons' London home, Porter House, was not amongst the few locations to which he could travel.

Tavaris and Gaspar had spent the better part of that drizzling November morning casting Cushioning Charms throughout the ground floor of Nottingham Hall. Now, almost a dozen shrilly squealing children — and several laughing adults — were zipping lowly between bodies and flying wild circles above heads in the crowded, streamer-filled Great Hall.

On the bright side, within the next hour, the whole lot of them wound up with bits of chocolate cake and pale-green frosting in their hair, on their faces, and all down their fronts in the wake of a massive, self-detonating birthday cake.

On the less bright side, so did Hermione.

Amidst the shocked silence, she turned to Tavaris.

"You must be joking," she whispered, bubbling with fury. "I thought we had agreed to let him forget about having an exploding cake."

Tavaris snickered. He wiped a dollop of frosting off the tip of her nose with his finger and ate it, grinning widely round his fingertip. She wrinkled her nose.

“Tastes like tiramisu,” he said, with humour.

“It’s mascarpone,” she muttered sourly. “Now get it off me.”

Nearby, Draco had begun crying, though it could barely be made out over the loud peals of Theodore’s giddy cackling, as he rolled across the floor, clutching his stomach. Daphne, too, had burst into tears of distress; she and Draco each went running into the cake-covered arms of their respective mothers, begging (the former) and screaming (the latter) that everything be fixed at post haste.

At the same time, Vincent Crabbe, Gregory Goyle, and Millicent Bulstrode were fleeing their own mothers, who had each drawn their wands to clean them; Flora and Hestia Carrow ate chocolate crumbs out of each other’s hair; Ernie Macmillan stood rigidly with a pinched, unhappy expression whilst he let Astoria Greengrass lick frosting off his elbow; and Pansy had decided upon retribution by tackling Theodore and sending them both barrelling into the lightly singed remains of the cake and, consequently, Marcus Flint, who had dived bodily into the sugary pile and started shovelling it into his mouth by the fistful.

Presleigh Parkinson and Emil Flint each hastened forth to retrieve their children. Meanwhile, all around, guests were recovering from their shock and drawing their wands to clean themselves off. Several flashes of light burst through the crowd as photographs were stolen before anyone could manage to completely do so.

“Blaise!” Madam Zabini called out abruptly. Her eyes darted from cake-covered child to cake-covered child, none of them her son. “Where is he? Darling, do you see him?”

“He’s round here somewhere,” Geoffrey replied unworriedly, but within a minute, she had raised her voice to a shout.

“*Blaise*!”

Hermione, too, began looking around the Hall from where she stood. She could not spot Blaise anywhere amongst the crowd.

“When did you last see him?” she asked Madam Zabini.

She only shook her head, her mouth opening and closing soundlessly, as though she were grasping at straws in her mind.

“He wasn’t flying, was he?” asked Hermione, and Madam Zabini nodded reluctantly. “Oh, dear — all right — well, he cannot have gone far. I’ll just have a peek upstairs, shall I? Bedelia,” she added quickly, glancing at her, “will you check the natatorium?”

Madam Zabini gasped, her eyes widening with horror. At once, she took off in the direction of the natatorium. Bedelia hastened after her.

“All this fuss …” muttered Geoffrey, in exasperation. “He’s probably just off hiding somewhere, the sneaky little bugger.”

“Evangeline, would you please see that there’s at least some dessert that can be served, preferably not from the floor or someone’s robes?” Hermione asked hurriedly, and before she went, she added to Tavaris, “Do you need anything from upstairs while I’m there?” She knew he did not, but he would be pleased that she had asked.

Sure enough, Tavaris smiled as he shook his head.

“I have everything I need right here,” he said, in a satisfied voice. He dropped a kiss to her temple. “Hurry back, darling.”

“Have my son cleaned up before I have!” she replied over her shoulder, already walking away. She noticed a missed spot of frosting still on her wrist as she started up the staircase in the entry hall and huffed. But, as much she tried to maintain her annoyance, she could feel amusement bubbling within her.

Nearly all ten of her nieces and nephews — not even to mention Rose or Teddy — would have loved this. Hugo, not so much.

James Sirius had never had an exploding birthday cake, but this was not for a lack of trying. More than a few times, he and Fred had attempted to stick fireworks into the cake without anyone noticing. Once, however, he had managed to have a birthday cake that turned everyone who had eaten a bite into a large canary. Roxanne and Dominique had ever so kindly offered to help their dear grandmother bake the cake and had, whilst Granny Weasley was not looking, snuck an appalling number of Canary Creams into the batter.

Hermione licked the frosting off her wrist. It was admittedly very good. Smiling a little to herself, she began opening doors in search of Blaise.

It did not take long to find him. As it turned out, Theodore had informed him that the cake was going to blow up, and Blaise had decided that he would be better off far away from the blast zone and had thus sequestered himself in the lady’s study on the first floor. When Hermione had entered, he had been lounging on the lilac loveseat, comfortably dressed in cake-free, emerald-green dress robes, and chewing on a Liquorice Wand that he must have swiped off the snacks table before fleeing.

“You caused your mother quite the fright, you know,” Hermione told him admonishingly, as she took his hand and led him from the study. She carried his toy broomstick in her other hand.

“Is she OK now?” Blaise asked.

“She will be once she’s seen that you are.”

He tore off another inch of his Liquorice Wand with his teeth as they walked, hanging onto her hand without caring to look where they were going, as though he could not be bothered

with anything that did not result in his own immediate satisfaction. It was both peculiar and humorous to observe the cool calm that he exuded even at the age of four.

“Do you want to hear a secret, Lady Mione?” he asked, almost idly.

“If you’d like to tell me one,” said Hermione.

“Auntie Dee told Mama that you can keep our secrets if it comes to it, so it’s OK if I tell you,” he explained, giving his half-eaten Liquorice Wand a swish as though casting a spell. “That’s why Mama says you’re a safe person. By the way, it’s a *humongous* compliment to be a safe person,” he added significantly, shooting her a haughty look, “so you ought to be very flattered.”

“I am,” said Hermione, truthfully touched. “Very much so.” But she felt herself frowning.

“Only Mama and Auntie Dee were my safe people before you.”

It truly was a tremendously heart-warming sentiment to hear, especially from the mouth of a child. Yet there was something exceedingly odd about this, in that Blaise’s statements did not quite line up with what Hermione knew to be true. Namely, the fact that she had never even met his “Auntie Dee.”

“I am outrageously honoured to be deemed a safe person for you, Blaise,” Hermione promised, before frowning at him quizzically. “Although — sorry — your Auntie Dee said this? That’s the witch who minds you, is that right? I believe your mother said her name was Daniella?”

Blaise’s dark eyes were suddenly alight with a mischievous gleam.

“*That’s the secret*!” he whispered. “Her name’s not Daniella at all!”

Hermione’s eyes widened slightly.

“Oh?”

“Mama calls her Dee, too, most of the time,” he began, whispering still. “She says, ‘Dee, darling, shall we luncheon in the gardens?’ And, ‘Dee, darling, does this colour suit me?’ But *once*, I had such a wicked, wicked nightmare that I simply *had* to go wake Mama, even though I’m not allowed to knock on her door at night-time, and Auntie Dee was in Mama’s bed, too, because they were having a sleepover —”

Her mouth fell open in shock.

“— and that time, Mama didn’t say, ‘Dee, darling’ — that time, when she was saying, ‘Wake up,’ she said, ‘Wake up, *Des—ah—mona*.’”

Hermione’s jaw dropped further. Her eyes darted hurriedly up and down the corridor to ensure no portraits were near enough to eavesdrop, then she drew them both to a halt and turned to face him.

“Des—*de*—mona?” she clarified, in a hushed voice, scarcely daring to believe she had heard correctly.

Blaise nodded. He pulled his hand from her grasp to clap it over his mouth and giggled into his palm. He lowered his hand to reveal a devilish little grin.

“That’s the first secret I ever told!” he whispered giddily.

She smiled at him shakily, her mind reeling.

It was by no means a common name, certainly not in this small corner of the wizarding world.

All this time, Desdemona Lestrange had not been hiding out on some tropical island, bathing in hush money; she had been living under a pseudonym in the home of the increasingly illustrious Madam Zabini. She probably used Polyjuice Potion or Charmed her more distinctive features every morning to avoid being recognised or have Blaise invite suspicion by pointing out in front of people that she had altered her appearance.

It all made perfect sense.

Of course, Madam Zabini would have gone after Geoffrey. Desdemona must have told her that he was a prime target. She would have known all about him from the decades she had spent married to Edmund; what made him laugh, what made him angry, what made him stand up just that little bit straighter; she could have listed Geoffrey’s every weak spot for Madam Zabini’s benefit.

And she could have said, too, that Hermione would be on their side.

In her mind’s eye, Hermione saw once more that final wink Desdemona had given her as the Aurors had escorted her out, looking for all the world like a grieving widow. It was as though she had been silently telling Hermione, with that wink, *Your turn.*

“Oh, my God,” Hermione breathed, in dazed incredulity. She looked down at Blaise again. “You — you mustn’t ever tell anyone else this secret, do you understand?”

There was not a shred of doubt in her mind that Tavaris, Abraxas, and Geoffrey would see both Desdemona and Madam Zabini dead if they knew. There would be no preventing it.

“Why would I tell anyone else?” asked Blaise, pulling a face. “No one else is one of my safe people.”

He tore off another sizeable chunk of his Liquorice Wand, took her hand again, and then seemed to wait expectantly for her to resume walking, as if his feet would not move without the momentum of being pulled along.

The laugh that escaped Hermione was slightly hysterical. She resumed her stride and led him down the staircase, still reeling.

A pair of murderous lesbian lovers. Quite progressive.

*

The air cooled further still in the weeks that followed Theodore's birthday party — and the photographed spread of frosting-faced Wizengamot members in the *Prophet*'s Society Section that had resulted from it. Eventually, the November rains transitioned into December winds. The clouds that had long filled the sky thickened and greyed, and the browned leaves that stuck to the ground seemed almost to freeze to the spot, trodden on again and again until pressed flat, without dimension.

In seemingly no time at all, the night of the Ministry of Magic's annual Yule Gala was upon them.

As she watched herself intently in her bathroom mirror, Hermione tilted her head slightly to one side, as if in thought. She narrowed her eyes, as if curious. And she twitched her lips repeatedly, affecting amusement, until she got the angle just right.

"You look perfectly ill-natured, my dear," her reflection remarked.

Testing out a cool, lightly drawling tone of voice, Hermione replied, "How kind of you to say."

She shook her head at herself. That was not quite it.

The voice required a faint, mocking undertone, so barely detectable that one got the impression one was the victim of a cruel joke without being able to fathom what the punchline was. A voice that made even the most intelligent of people feel suddenly out of their depths, and the most self-assured, suddenly small; a voice that made shoulders shrink in on themselves.

Oh, well, she thought, pursing her lips, painted the muted red of bitter wine. She would get the hang of it eventually. She smoothed back the sleek sides of her updo, then turned slightly before the mirror to inspect the rest of her reflection.

Her gown was not red, this time; not strapless, nor paired with glittering gold jewellery and illusionary gloves; not chosen for her. Rather, it was silver, sleeved, and slinking, cut neatly across her collarbones with a swooshing, open back, fabric pooling in a layered swoop at the bottom of her spine.

When Hermione lifted her gaze back to her face, she was uncertain whether the vindictive pleasure she found there belonged to her or her reflection. Perhaps it was her own; she could certainly feel it rising within herself, even if she had not known her face could form such an expression.

There was something strangely seductive about this sort of scheming. It provided a heady sense of power, wickedly enticing for its slyness. The lies, the ploys, the underhandedness — even its bitterness often tasted sweet.

She went back into the bedroom to pull on a pair of white evening gloves. She started with the left one, drawing it hastily up over her elbow before Theodore entered, lest he caught a

glimpse of the scar on her forearm.

“That’s a lot of silver, Ma,” he said, sounding impressed, as she yanked her sleeve down over the glove. “The suits of armour are going to think you’re one of them!”

She pulled on the right glove, shooting him a smile.

“I shall take it as a compliment if they do,” she replied.

She sat down at her desk to put on her kitten heels, buckling one thin strap at a time. Theodore hopped playfully onto the pouffe beside her to watch.

“Are you afraid your shoes will fall off?” he asked quizzically. “Is that why you’ve buckles on them?”

Hermione stilled briefly, then resumed.

“Well, they haven’t any laces to keep them on, do they?” she said, as light-heartedly as she could manage. She changed the subject quickly. “Are you going to be on your best behaviour for Dinky tonight, my love?”

Theodore gave a long-suffering sigh.

“If I must.”

“You must,” she told him firmly, standing up.

“Are you going to be on *your* best behaviour?” he asked, now rolling onto his back on the pouffe to gaze at her upside-down.

“I am always on my best behaviour,” said Hermione loftily.

Theodore scrunched up his nose.

“Sounds boring.”

Somehow, she doubted that she would be bored. She urged him to his feet so she could give him a kiss goodnight, then summoned Dinky from the nursery to keep an eye on him and went downstairs to meet Tavaris in the front hall. He gave her an appreciative onceover.

“Very nice, darling.”

“Thank you,” she said, as she took her coat from Goppy. “Thank you, Goppy.” She pulled on the black mink, glancing sidelong at Tavaris. “You look rather smart yourself,” she forced herself to add.

She wished it were a lie. His hair had recently been trimmed, short, neat, and speckled with grey; his face was clean-shaven; his white bowtie was crisply knotted at his throat; and his black dress robes were cut as sharply as his jaw. A proper English gentleman in his evening

attire. In truth, Tavaris had never been an outwardly hideous person. She wondered sometimes whether less people might have believed she had chosen to be here if he had been.

His posture was not as straight as it had once been, though. Years of leaning on a walking-stick for support was doing its job of curving out his spine to fit her memory of him in the future, slowly but surely.

Awaiting them outside the front gates idled one of the Ministry's sleek, black cars. No longer a time of war, the driver was, simply, a driver. As such, the drive was not one of stifling tension — not entirely, anyway. All the way out of Nottinghamshire, Tavaris loudly dreaded that he and Abraxas would once again be seated at different tables. So appalling this was, he had not even bothered holding it over Abraxas' head that he and Hermione had been put at Table Two, whilst the Malfoys would be slumming it at Table Four.

"Do you have any idea who else will be at our table?" Hermione asked, as she filled their chilled flutes with a complimentary bottle of Beau Champagne from an ice bucket on the side.

"Arsenius Jigger, for a start," said Tavaris. "He's a patron of St Mungo's Hospital, so the organisers have granted him prime seating — thank you, darling — cheers." He paused to take a sip and give a small sigh of satisfaction at the taste. "Crouch, too."

She sighed irritably.

"There was a slight fuss about it, I hear." Tavaris gave her an amused look. "Everyone on the organising committee is endlessly grateful that you have decided to attend this year. Apparently, they've sat Crouch next to you in the potentially misguided hope that he will comport himself in a milder manner whilst in the company of a young witch."

Hermione scoffed.

"*Potentially misguided*," she repeated derisively, and Tavaris chuckled. "Bartemius Crouch Sr possesses no *milder manner* — such a thing is, in fact, quite beyond his capabilities."

The driver — a previously silent grey-haired wizard in plain, perfunctory dress robes — let out a small snort. Hermione too strongly believed she was right to care that he was listening.

An individual in possession of an even mildly mild manner would not currently have their son subdued under the Imperius Curse and imprisoned in their basement.

The remainder of the journey passed smoothly, with the exception of potholes and consequently spilt champagne. The bumps lessened as they neared the high-traffic heart of Central London, and soon, the bright lights and musical liveliness of Tottenham Court Road. Packs of people were rushing to make it to their evening performance, whilst at the centre of the roundabout, two charity Santa Clauses were battling it out over their self-declared territory, much to the confusion of nearby children and the dismay of their frazzled parents.

Just off the street, the car slowed to a stop before the shadowy mouth of an especially seedy-looking alleyway.

Old rubbish appeared to have formed its own ecosystem in days-old puddles, and an overlarge rat could be spotted wriggling out the end of a rusty drainpipe. An elderly Muggle couple clearly dressed for the theatre quickened their steps as they passed, neither of them daring to glance down the alley, lest they might accidentally catch the attention of an unsavoury character lurking there in the dark.

The driver stepped out of the car to open Tavaris' door. He extended a gloved hand to help Hermione out after him and wished them both a pleasant evening. Less than eager to idle on the pavement with all the Muggles about, Tavaris did not waste a second before placing a hand on the small of her back and ushering her into the alley.

As soon as the pair entered, their senses were bombarded by the merry volume of dozens of voices and the blinding lights of obtrusively flashing cameras. Large posters materialised on the brick walls, each of which depicted a different performance, from feather-wearing ballerinas under glowing spotlights to a costumed wizard attempting to reason with a hopping pot. A royal-blue carpet lined with velvet ropes cut a path down the alley to a grand entrance on the right, all lit up to admit the procession of parties through a pair of tall oak doors with gleaming gold handles, manned by a pair of grunting security trolls.

"Welcome, darling," Tavaris murmured in her ear, "to the Bard Theatre of Enchanting Dramatics."

Hermione pretended to look around with interest. The last time she had been here, it had been her and Ron taking his mother to see a live production of Beedle the Bard's *The Fountain of Fair Fortune*, as a gift for her sixty-eighth birthday. Hermione wondered if Molly and Arthur were here now, or if they had chosen to stay home to welcome Bill and Charlie back for Christmas after the latter's very first term at Hogwarts.

"Mr Nott, can you tell us anything about tonight's performances?" asked a reporter on the other side of the velvet rope.

"I'm afraid it will be a surprise for us as well," Tavaris replied.

"Well, hello, Mrs Nott —"

Oh, bloody hell, she thought, already rolling her eyes.

"— I'm Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent for *The Daily Prophet*. I'd noticed you tend to decline your invitation to this event, so we all want to know, what's so special about this year?"

Hermione stared straight ahead at the wizard in front of her, who was wearing a star-spangled wizard's hat, and prayed for the queue to shuffle forward quicker. Even when it did, Rita Skeeter followed keenly.

"You recently joined the Ladies' Tea Society, is that correct?" Skeeter asked, never to be deterred. "Was it perhaps new friends from the Society who have encouraged you to attend?"

On Hermione's left, another journalist pressed closer. She had what looked like a perm that was partly squashed under a fur hat.

"My name is Lenora Vane, Mrs Nott, I write a column on the latest wizarding fashion trends for *Witch Weekly*," she told Hermione, holding a violet-feathered quill to a notepad. "We've seen a lot of fur here tonight. Can you tell me about your coat?"

Hermione missed a lot of things about the future, but the press was most certainly not among them. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes again. Ever so unhelpfully, Tavaris was currently laughing under his breath.

"You wore one to the Yule Gala in nineteen-eighty," Lenora Vane hurried on, as the queue moved forward again, "and recently, we've seen a notable spike in fur coats — might you be the one to attribute this rising trend to?"

"Would you consider yourself a trendsetter?" Skeeter asked swiftly. "I did spot *several* witches of the Ladies' Tea Society in fur tonight."

At last, they had reached the front of the queue. One of the security trolls took Hermione and Tavaris' invitation, crossed their names off a list, and waved them inside, safely away from the herd of reporters.

"Oh, my God," Hermione said, gazing up at Tavaris in abject horror. "Am I —" she was almost too distressed to say it, "— am I *known for fur*?"

He snorted.

"It would appear so, darling."

He offered his arm to lead her, utterly distraught, further into the opulent entrance hall, its panelled walls lined with more posters. They ascended a short marble staircase alongside the other chattering parties and continued through the open doors at the top into a large, crowded lobby with carpet the same royal-blue as the one outside. From the high, muraled ceiling hung a massive gold chandelier, which seemed to tremble and sway precariously with all the bustling below it.

"So many bodies in the way, one can hardly reach cloak check," Griselda Marchbanks complained to her companion.

"The performance had better not be opera," Edolie Parkinson drawled nearby. A white feather boa was draped round her arms. "I do so detest the opera."

"No worse than last year's," Beldon Yaxley remarked to his wife, whose evening gloves were an eye-watering magenta. "Really, Dame Antonia's Library was no place for an event of this size."

"I say, this is very disorderly," huffed Great-Aunt Muriel.

At the foot of a grand, gold-railed staircase was a gleaming bar top that was presently being swarmed by the arrivals. Algie Longbottom had resorted to swinging his hands above his

head to get the attention of one of the harried barmen; he succeeded only in having Augusta swat his hands out of the air.

Several young wizards in livery were attempting to direct the crowd from the outskirts of the room. After finally managing to check her coat and Tavaris' cloak, Hermione tried to make a beeline for one of them, but Tavaris was too confident that he could find the way on his own to ask for guidance. He directed her, inch by insufferable inch, through the crowd and toward the staircase.

"Table Two," he reminded her in an undertone, as they ascended to the upper level. "I'd wager we're in a box."

On their way round the gold bannister on the first floor, they passed a pair of paned-glass doors that looked out onto a small terrace, where Presleigh Parkinson and Lancaster Selwyn were conversing privately, each puffing on a pipe.

Through the doors of the theatre's east wing, there was a short, closed-off corridor from which the majority of the crowd was kept away by another security troll. Over a dozen people milled about inside, more freely and sedately, as house-elves in royal-blue pillowcases with silver feathered quills emblazoned on their fronts wandered with trays of drinks and or d'oeuvres. At the end of the corridor, Hermione spotted the Minister for Magic herself; Bagnold appeared to be amidst a hushed conversation with Martin Bones, the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

The Malfoys, self-important patrons that they were, stood stiffly amongst a swarm of Healers-in-Chief who seemed to be bombarding them with stories of the frail and dying in the hopes of earning a hefty amount of pity-ridden Galleons. From what Hermione could hear of the conversation as she and Tavaris approached, she gathered that Healer Hippocrates Smethwyck — of the "Dangerous" Dai Llewellyn Ward: Serious Bites — was coming dangerously close to making Evangeline lose her lunch by regaling the gruesome tale of a particularly nasty Quintaped mauling.

"He'd had no idea that was the Isle of Drear, the poor wizard," Healer Smethwyck was lamenting. "And that lack of knowledge cost him an arm and a leg — oh, not literally, Lady Malfoy, I'm so sorry — you needn't fear, both his legs are still perfectly intact!"

Evangeline looked quite green, which clashed rather poorly with her burgundy evening gown.

"Ah, Tavaris!" Abraxas exclaimed, upon spotting him and Hermione. "Do excuse me," he added to the Healers, before striding firmly away to meet them.

"Is your box in the east wing, then?" Tavaris asked him.

"The west, they were kind enough to give us ours," said Abraxas, "but I am avoiding Crouch, and he's there now grilling Bagman on some idiosyncrasy or another. Unfortunately, we were followed …" He threw the Healers a disdainful glance over his shoulder. "They have sat the whole lot of them in our box."

“One would think it would be more beneficial to spread them out.”

“Evidently, they are unconvinced that the plights of one Healer will be sufficient enough in inciting our sympathies.”

“How strange,” said Hermione, affecting a frown. “Don’t they know that the sympathy of a Malfoy knows no bounds?”

“Yes, everyone ought to be aware by now of the intrinsic Malfoy charitableness,” said Tavaris, glancing at her in feigned puzzlement. “Odd.”

“You are both devastatingly funny,” said Abraxas, unamused.

At that moment, Evangeline managed to extricate herself, thus sacrificing Lucius and Narcissa to feign polite interest in Spattergroit statistics.

“I grow increasingly eager for this evening to proceed,” she said.

“Eager for it end, rather,” drawled Abraxas.

“No, I do wish to see the performance. I adore the ballet.”

Tavaris took two champagne flutes off the tray of a passing house-elf and handed one to Hermione.

“I have many fond memories of my mother taking me as a girl,” Evangeline continued, with a small, wistful smile. “I was ever so taken with the ballerinas. To me, no creature more beautiful had ever graced the earth.”

Abraxas hummed noncommittedly.

“Is it to be ballet, then?” inquired Hermione.

“A plethora of performances, I hear.”

“Here’s hoping it’s not opera,” said Tavaris, raising his flute.

Abraxas snorted. “I’ll drink to that.”

Hermione drank from her own flute. As she lowered it from her lips, she caught Abraxas’ gaze. Out of curiosity, she narrowed her eyes and tilted her head to one side, very slowly.

He stiffened instantly.

She made her lips twitch with amusement.

“Stop that,” he snapped.

“Stop what?” she asked innocently.

Abraxas took a large swig of champagne and said nothing. For the next several minutes, however, he kept glancing back at her and away again quickly, looking extremely discomfited.

Eventually, a disembodied voice announced that it was time to take their seats. Hermione and Tavaris parted from the Malfoys to greet Arsenius Jigger — who had donned indigo dress robes that gave him the appearance of a wizard drowning in a large bundle of fabric — and followed him through the first door on the left, into their assigned box.

The usual seats had been replaced by a round, white-clothed table set with silver plates and goblets. A single ornate candlestick perched amongst the poinsettias of the centrepiece.

Hermione peered over the marble bannister at the ground floor; the seats there, too, had been removed to make way for more tables. Members of the Wizengamot and their families were scattered near the front. Left of the stage, Dolores Umbridge was easy to spot in her frilly pink gown, as she greeted the Head of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, only for Belinda Brown to give her the cold shoulder. Lyall Lupin was there, too, dressed smartly and looking as if he were already longing to leave, judging by the way his whole body seemed to sigh.

“I’m surprised to have not seen any Floo-Pow advertisements yet,” Professor Jigger remarked, as he took his seat beside Tavaris. Hermione sat down on his other side and placed her champagne next to her water goblet.

“They hardly require advertising,” said Tavaris.

“True. Still, I wonder how the Ministry managed to convince them to host,” said Professor Jigger, with a pensive expression. In an afterthought, he added, “I know a wizard who works for Floo-Pow.”

“Do you, really?”

“Well, I assume so, I have not seen him since he interviewed there.”

“When was that?” asked Hermione.

“Eighty years ago, give or take.”

The door to the box opened, and she sucked in a quick breath.

The white-haired Elphias Doge entered, seemingly in mid-conversation with the person behind him. He had matched his violet dress robes to a thoroughly unmatching boater’s hat, which was at least better than the moth-eaten fez he had worn to Bill and Fleur’s wedding, though slightly worse than his pointy hat from meetings of the Order of the Phoenix in the ‘90s and significantly worser than the beret he had worn to Hermione and Ron’s own wedding. A very drunk Dean Thomas had asked Elphias if he happened to own a raspberry-coloured one, resulting in Elphias promptly Charming his current beret raspberry, much to the amusement of Dean, Hermione, Harry, and absolutely no one else.

Now, Elphias fell carefully silent at the sight of her.

And from the doorway behind him emerged the thin, towering figure of Professor Dumbledore in a holly-patterned wizard's hat.

Tavaris gave a barely audible sigh. On weak legs, Hermione stood.

"What a happy surprise," she said, endeavouring to sound as if it were. "It's wonderful to see you, sir."

It was a challenge to hold his gaze — the gaze of someone who knew that she was destined to die. It was different with the goblins, whom she knew could not care less about her fate beyond how it would serve their ends. Now, she felt too seen; transparent.

But Professor Dumbledore, of course, gave nothing away. He clasped her proffered hand warmly with both his own and bestowed upon her a small smile.

"And you, my dear," he said, and he nodded pleasantly to both Tavaris and Professor Jigger before turning to Elphias. "I do not believe you have had the pleasure of meeting the young Lady Nott."

"I have not. Elphias Doge," he introduced himself, without inflection. He shook Hermione's hand and promptly raised his fuzzy, white eyebrows in surprise. "My word. What an unexpectedly firm handshake from a young lady."

"Why, Doge, I had the same thought!" said Professor Jigger.

Elphias nodded at him rapidly.

"If I'd closed my eyes," he said, "I might have believed I was shaking hands with Bartemius Crouch!"

Hermione laughed politely. When she glanced at him, Professor Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling with private amusement behind his half-moon spectacles.

"What's this about me?" asked Crouch, entering behind him.

"Have no fear, Barty," Professor Dumbledore told him. "We were merely discussing the firmness of your handshake."

Crouch looked nonplussed. His befuddlement increased at the sight of Hermione. He cleared his throat awkwardly before stepping forward and clasping her hand.

"Lady Nott, I hadn't realised you would be attending this year."

"I enjoy the theatre," she explained simply.

"Of course." He cleared his throat again, glanced around for the place card with his name on it, and promptly grimaced.

The last time Hermione had interacted with him had been directly following the Aurors' raid on the Nott Estate. He had come to verify Tavaris' story from his interview and offer a formal apology on the behalf of the Ministry of Magic for making such "unsavoury insinuations" about her private life. It had been an infinitely uncomfortable conversation for them both. Even three years later, he could scarcely look her in the eye.

"We truly are fortunate for your presence this year," Professor Jigger told Hermione sincerely, as they all took their seats. "There would be far too much testosterone in this box otherwise."

"A bunch of old coots, we are," Elphias chortled, clasping his hands atop his belly. "It's no wonder they have tucked us away up here."

Crouch glowered at his goblet, as though unappreciative of his being lumped in with the "old coots." He was the youngest there, after Hermione.

"I suspect this seating arrangement is far more strategic than merely that," said Professor Dumbledore, with a knowing smile. "Tell us, Elphias, Arsenius, noble patrons that you both are, has St Mungo's Board of Governors briefed you on the status of the hospital's potions stores prior to this event?"

A short laugh burst out of Elphias.

"Indeed, they have, Albus," he said wryly. He looked at Tavaris. "I am meant to express to you the importance of dragon liver for the brewing of several Healing Potions. I hear your constituents in Romania are getting stingy with it."

"Not detrimentally so," said Tavaris, leaning back and folding his hands in his lap. "But if this is about Romania, specifically, you ought to speak to International Magical Cooperation over there —" he nodded to Crouch, "— or better yet, the Supreme Mugwump on your left. However, if it is a mere matter of not enough of our imports going to the hospital, then it is the Potions Association with whom you want to have a word, as they thoroughly regulate our distribution here." This time, he nodded to Professor Jigger, who gave a long-suffering sigh.

"I swear, being a patron consistently comes back to bite me," he said. "At least one of the St Mungo's Governors is taking me to lunch near weekly to talk distribution regulations. They seem to be under the impression that I run the entirety of the Potions Association myself."

"What if," Elphias started, with a reproachful expression, "it is a matter of the Board of Governors' growing grudge against you for refusing to sign the contract offered to the E.P.T.D. last year?"

"Then you may direct them to my wife," Tavaris replied smoothly, nodding to Hermione, "so that they have someone with whom to commiserate over my long list of failings."

Hermione snorted without meaning to; she covered it with a cough.

Just then, one of the wizards in livery appeared to take drink orders.

“Shall we start with the lady?” he prompted.

“A glass of elderflower wine, please, if you would,” Hermione said, and she gestured to Tavaris. “He’ll have a firewhiskey, neat, and — scotch, is that right, Mr Crouch?”

“You have a keen memory. Neat,” he added curtly to the server.

“Is this a game?” asked Elphias, seemingly delighted. “Shall you guess the rest of our drinks as well?”

Hermione gave another polite laugh.

“Well, Professor Jigger will have a glass of elderberry wine, then,” she told the server, smiling. “This fine gentleman —” she gestured to Elphias, “— will have … sherry?”

Elphias frowned.

“Do I give the impression of someone who drinks sherry?”

“Yes,” said both Tavaris and Professor Jigger at once.

“And as for Professor Dumbledore …” Hermione huffed slightly. “A large brandy.”

“I am indeed partial to brandies of deeply specific sizes,” said Professor Dumbledore, taken aback. “My dear, you may very well be in possession of the most *useful* party trick I have ever encountered.”

The gas lamps began to flicker in warning as the server left to fetch their drinks. To a chorus of “ooh”s and “ah”s from the guests below, the first course materialised on everyone’s plates: a salad of mixed greens, pine nuts, prosciutto, and sliced pears, drizzled with something peculiarly purple.

At last, the gas lamps dimmed entirely, leaving them all to dine by candlelight. A hush fell over the crowd.

Upon the stage, the red velvet curtains were drawn back to reveal a single, spot-lit, voluptuous witch in a Victorian-esque evening gown, who thrust her arms out wide, opened her mouth, and began to belt out what might have been an introduction entirely in indistinguishable French opera.

Crouch sighed heavily into his hands. Tavaris cast a long, miserable look across the theatre to the box opposite them; Abraxas caught his gaze and mimed knotting a noose, which earned him several appalled looks from the Healers at his table.

Thankfully, the server returned shortly thereafter with their drinks, just as the dullness of the performance caused murmured conversation to break out in the box.

“… publish a few works on potion-making, and suddenly, that is all anyone knows you for,” Professor Jigger was saying frustratedly, as Hermione accepted her goblet of wine with thanks, “never mind that you have other areas of study.”

"*The Essential Defence Against the Dark Arts* has been added to the Hogwarts booklist as well now, Arsenius," Professor Dumbledore murmured back, his eyes twinkling.

"Why, Albus, you mustn't take it personally. My strife is not with you; it is with your *students*."

"No correlation there whatsoever," muttered Tavaris sarcastically.

Professor Dumbledore looked endlessly amused. He peered with interest at his tankard-sized tumbler of brandy as it was placed before him.

"Quite impeccable, thank you."

"You are very welcome, sir," said the server.

"Every year, I am contacted by a fresh batch of wide-eyed graduates inquiring after an apprenticeship," Professor Jigger waffled on, "yet it is only ever in *potions*, seeing as that is all they associate me with!"

Hermione's ears perked up. She sat forward gingerly.

"Have I understood your current conundrum correctly, sir?" she asked. "You are struggling to find an apprentice for the study of Defence Against the Dark Arts?"

"You understand perfectly. By Merlin, I'd like to focus on something else for once!" Professor Jigger shook his head to himself, his expression deeply disgruntled. "I should never have put my name on the apothecary — *Slugs* would have been fine enough on its own, no need for any *Jiggers*."

"Are you quite sure?" asked Elphias sceptically.

Hermione's mind was already racing. This was precisely the sort of apprenticeship to which Remus was suited. A hopeful smile began to stretch her lips; in the attempt to hide it, she lifted her goblet of wine for a sip, only for her nose to be immediately greeted by the familiar, dank aroma of the Draught of Peace.

She froze, her heart skipping a beat.

"I suppose you could write another book, couldn't you?"

"With what research? Lady Nott is right; I require an apprentice."

Slowly, she lowered her goblet from her lips. She glanced covertly at the server as he set down Tavaris' tumbler of firewhiskey, and she felt foolish for not having recognised him instantly.

It was the barman whom Barty Crouch Jr had arranged to serve her spiked drinks at the Yule Gala four years prior, so as to sneak the potion past the heightened wartime security.

He was still under the Imperius Curse.

Hermione felt slightly ill. She caught Tavaris eye desperately, only to realise that she had no idea how to communicate any of this without alerting anyone else at the table.

He raised a questioning eyebrow.

She gave her head a subtle shake. She pretended to take a sip, her lips tightly sealed, and swallowed nothing, harsh against a suddenly dry throat. She returned the goblet to the table, willing her hand not to shake.

“To your satisfaction, darling?” Tavaris murmured, watching her.

Professor Dumbledore was watching, too.

She nodded briefly.

As the barman served the last of the drinks and left, she reached for her fork and forced herself to start on her salad as if nothing had happened.

Even so, her eyes darted round the table, paranoia clawing at her chest. She could not help but feel that she was being too obvious. She was not in the presence of anyone particularly unobservant, after all.

Quite the contrary.

It was surely a fool’s errand: pretending one’s drink was not spiked with potion whilst in the company of a potioneer, a potions trader, a jurist, an ex-Head of Magical Law Enforcement, and the Chief Warlock to boot.

It did not appear, at least, that anyone had noticed. As the opera singer trilled on at an increasingly high pitch, Tavaris and Professor Dumbledore each returned his gaze to his plate, and the conversation carried on lowly.

“I did receive an application from one witch about a Defence Against the Dark Arts apprenticeship,” Professor Jigger admitted, reaching for his goblet. “Several months back, this was.”

“Her credentials were lacking, were they?” Crouch inquired, stabbing at his salad.

“Not at all. Nevertheless, I had to turn her down, unfortunately. I find most witches are too squeamish for the experimental side of things — do forgive me, Lady Nott,” Professor Jigger added hastily to Hermione, “this is a generalisation, of course.”

Hermione blinked, disconcerted to find herself abruptly the centre of attention. Then she realised what Professor Jigger had said, and her eyebrows rose very high.

“No, no — please, go on,” she said, feigning interest. “Squeamish, you say?”

“Well, yes, blanching as many of you do at the first drop of blood.”

She hummed as if considering this. Tavaris was already snickering.

“I suppose that *is* true, isn’t it?” she murmured ponderingly. “We women are just so unaccustomed to dealing with blood, after all; we can hardly help but faint at the sight of it.”

Professor Jigger nodded shortly, chewing a bite of his salad. To her disappointment, and to his own detriment, he breezed on.

“I remind you that this is a generalisation. I *am* aware that not all witches react so poorly, and in potion-making, when it is safely tucked inside a phial, there is never an issue. It is an entirely understandable reaction but, you see, because so many are opposed to getting their hands a little bloody, the risk is too —”

“I believe you are underestimating the mess, sir.”

Crouch choked on a bit of pear. Meanwhile, Tavaris’ eyes remained alight with mirth. He cleared his throat.

“Darling, I fear this is not suitable dinner conversation.”

“Arsenius, my friend, might I advise putting down the shovel?” said Professor Dumbledore, equally amused. “I am afraid you are digging yourself into quite a deep hole right now.”

Professor Jigger appeared bemused. It was probably for the best that, at that precise moment, the opera singer finished her set; a chorus of applause overtook the ringing that echoed in the wake of her voice. She bowed deeply and sashayed out of sight.

Both Tavaris and Crouch breathed a sigh of relief.

The next moment, however, the latter’s relief evaporated. He glowered fiercely at the stage as the spotlight was taken up once more, this time by a rosy-faced, blond wizard who gave the appearance of once possessing a burly physique that had now begun to slip away from him. He grinned at his audience and aimed the tip of his wand at his own throat to project his voice.

“Welcome, esteemed colleagues and friends,” he boomed brightly, “to the one-hundred-and-seventieth annual ministerial Yule Gala!”

There was a great, roaring cheer, which only served to infuriate Crouch further. He tossed his napkin on the table.

“I am Ludovic ‘Ludo’ Bagman, your Head of Magical Games and Sports, your *favourite* old Beater,” Ludo Bagman said slyly, winking at the crowd, “and — for tonight and tonight only — your endlessly flattered emcee!”

The cheer only grew in volume, much to Bagman’s clear pleasure.

“*Bloody Bagman*,” Crouch grumbled spitefully. “We are descending into anarchy.”

Professor Dumbledore raised an eyebrow at him.

“I believe that is a touch dramatic, Barty.”

“Dramatic? *He shared sensitive information with Augustus Rookwood*!”

At once, Hermione’s throat tightened.

“And do not say he was proved innocent, Albus,” Crouch argued, pointing at him sharply, “because he was merely *deemed* innocent by a hapless bunch of Quidditch fanatics!”

“I take it you are not a Wimbourne Wasps fan, then.”

“Bagman could not have known Rookwood was a spy, Crouch, none of us did,” Elphias pointed out. “*You* did not.”

As Crouch spluttered furiously, the salad plates vanished, replaced with those of the second course — a seared tuna dish — but no one paid much mind to it. Bagman was now encouraging a round of applause in honour of Floo-Plow for kindly sponsoring the event, wherever they were.

Hermione’s throat had only grown tighter. She eyed her wine goblet with shameful longing.

“Tavaris, do you suppose we could get a bottle of this for home?” she asked abruptly, grabbing her goblet. She held it out to him; her hand was trembling. “Try it, would you, see if you like it — it’s really quite good.”

Tavaris gave her a calculating look. Nevertheless, he took the proffered goblet without question, swished the lightly-coloured liquid about a bit, and brought it to his nose for consideration.

He blinked.

After a second, he recovered from his surprise and pretended to take a sip, just as Hermione had. He then lowered the goblet and regarded it as though pondering the taste.

“I see why you like it, certainly,” he said eventually. “I shall inquire after the brand when the server returns.” And he set the goblet down between them, so it was not within her immediate reach.

“Thank you,” she said, and she drank some water instead.

He gave her knee a reassuring squeeze beneath the table.

Shortly after the third course arrived and Professor Jigger began the process of subtly picking scallops out of his seafood linguini with a pinched look, Tavaris excused himself to the loo, hopefully to see to the matter of the Imperiused barman. For few other reasons would he have left Hermione to be unsupervised in the presence of Professor Dumbledore. She wondered if he knew that Elphias, too, had been a member of the Order.

Back on the stage, a single ballerina was now swaying out of a pirouette, as though faint, weakened by illness, whilst a sorrowful melody filled the theatre. In the box opposite, Evangeline was watching keenly, seemingly moved by whatever tale the ballerina was

wordlessly telling. Perhaps if Hermione had been paying the performance any attention, she would have been moved as well, for even Abraxas appeared strangely beholden to the sight.

Hermione shot another glance at her goblet of wine, then forcibly tore her eyes away. She shifted with discomfort.

And then it struck her, suddenly, that she would not be left alone with this group again. If she wanted to say anything, now was her chance. It would come at price, she knew; if she went forth, Professor Dumbledore and Elphias would both know that she was in contact with Remus.

But, for Remus, it was worth whatever looks she might receive.

"Oh!" she said, with enough abruptness to draw all four of their gazes. She sat forward and lowered her voice. "Professor Jigger, I've just remembered — I happened to bump into Lyall Lupin recently, whilst Christmas shopping in Diagon Alley — you know Mr Lupin, don't you?"

"Why, of course," said Professor Jigger, lowering his scallop-speared fork.

"Lyall Lupin's reputation is well established even beyond his field," said Elphias.

"Even if it were not," said Professor Jigger, glancing at him briefly, "I have had the pleasure of working alongside him before. Well, perhaps pleasure is not the most *apt* word for it." He smiled sheepishly. "I fear I got myself into a spot of trouble whilst investigating a particularly beastly herd of Banshees a couple of decades back."

Professor Dumbledore looked at him in curiosity.

"I do not believe I have heard this story, Arsenius," he said.

Professor Jigger's expression became slightly cagey. He drank from his goblet awkwardly and swallowed much too loudly.

"There is a … erm … small possibility that I owe Lupin my life."

Crouch gave a small snort.

Perfect, thought Hermione.

"Mr Lupin is responsible for transferring a couple of the Nott family ghosts to the estate after their passing, you know," she shared. "Tavaris' Great-Aunt Diera and Great-Uncle Wilfred."

"Oh, did he?" Professor Jigger frowned to himself. "I had heard about Wilfred, but I had not been aware that he and his sister-in-law passed on into that realm together …"

Hermione's mouth opened and closed soundlessly, her mind leaping away from her current objective. She had not realised until just then how odd it was that both Wilfred Nott and the wife of one of his brothers just so happened to share the same to desire to become ghosts.

Now that she thought about it, she was pretty sure the same date of death had been printed beneath each of their names in the family tome.

She gave her head a small shake.

"Anyway," she proceeded determinedly, "Mr Lupin informed me that his son is currently interested in a Defence Against the Dark Arts apprenticeship."

At once, Elphias glanced sidelong at Professor Dumbledore, whose eyes narrowed shrewdly.

"Well, then, this solves everything!" said Professor Jigger brightly. "I would be entirely pleased to have any son of *Lyall Lupin's* as my apprentice. He must apply! I insist!"

Hermione tried not to smile too broadly. Even so, her face felt uncomfortably warm under Professor Dumbledore's gaze.

"The trouble is, sir, Mr Lupin's son hopes to find a *paid* apprenticeship," she explained tentatively, "and there are not so many out there. Between you and I, I do not believe he can afford to not be working — and if he wishes to throw his whole self into such an apprenticeship … well … I imagine it would be terribly difficult to find a suitable work-study balance, wouldn't you agree?"

Professor Jigger appeared to consider this deeply.

"Yes … I can see how that might prove troublesome for some folk …" he murmured, frowning at his wine. "Perhaps I would have more applicants if I offered to … oh, but how sad …"

Hermione pursed her lips. How sad, indeed — that her respect for him had dwindled to such a degree in the span of three courses.

"Mr Lupin's son was rather an exceptional student, if I recall," said Professor Dumbledore, after a long moment.

"A prefect, even," Hermione put in.

"Was he?" said Professor Jigger thoughtfully, and he began nodding slowly. "Perhaps we will be able to negotiate a reasonable wage." His next nod was decisive. "I shall write to Lupin in the morning."

At that moment, Tavaris returned to the box, and Professor Dumbledore — as though sensing that he could not hear about this — changed the subject by abruptly delving into a tale about the first time he had ever attended the ballet. Apparently, he had found himself backstage after getting lost on the way to the toilets and had, on account of his ("in hindsight") slightly questionable wardrobe choice, been confused for a dancer and ushered on stage mid-performance, at which point he had had no choice but to go along with it until the curtain fell.

"Any talent for ballet I may have appeared to possess in the eyes of the audience, I must attribute to my increasingly desperate need for the loo."

“You truly amaze me, Albus,” said Elphias, chuckling.

“Do I still?” replied Professor Dumbledore, in pleasant surprise.

“You shall never cease.”

“My friend, you put me at terrible risk of an unshrinkable ego.”

“There are potions for that,” said Professor Jigger knowledgeably.

Tavaris appeared as though he desperately wished to say something horribly insulting and was doing everything in his power to hold himself back. He drank deeply from his tumbler, then dug into his pocket to retrieve his chequebook. He waved it to show Abraxas, who promptly scowled and scrambled to get out his own.

“The donation table is in the lobby, darling,” Tavaris said, as he jotted down a number, “just beside the bar, you cannot miss it.”

He tore the cheque out and handed it to Hermione.

“I will be back shortly, gentlemen,” she said, rising from the table, and she slipped out of the box.

Abraxas caught up with her before she even reached the stairs.

“Well?” he said expectantly.

She rolled her eyes and showed him.

“Positively ghastly!” he declared, appearing almost affronted. “All that for the ill? Preposterous … just preposterous …” When they reached the donations table, he produced a Self-Inking Quill from his pompously dazzling white dress robes and tweaked his own donation accordingly, mumbling irritably to himself as he did so.

Nearby, Moody stood staunchly on guard in his maroon uniform, watching Abraxas with a dark expression. His magical eye flitted rapidly about the place.

“Why, Lady Nott, don’t you look splendid this evening.”

Hermione glanced sideways to find Wymond Selwyn suddenly at her side, smiling blandly. He had his grey hair combed back, shining slickly, to reveal his receding hairline. His daughter, Sophronia Travers, hovered behind him, wearing a fur shawl.

“You flatter me,” said Hermione, smiling back coolly.

Wymond bowed his head.

“I shall endeavour to do it more frequently.”

Abraxas cleared his throat, perhaps in warning.

Before Wymond could either ignore this or smoothly retract his compliment, a grating, girlish voice sounded behind Hermione.

“Lady Nott, what a delightful surprise!”

“Oh, for the love of God …”

“I am so pleased to have bumped into y—”

“*Madam Umbridge*,” Hermione said coldly, whirling round to glare at her, “I fear you have quite deluded yourself if you believe the mere sound of your voice is somehow welcome within my earshot.”

Umbridge gaped, dumbstruck.

“Oh, good,” said Hermione. “Silence.”

Abraxas sniggered.

“L—Lady Nott, I — I must confess I am terribly confused,” Umbridge began to stammer, her face flushing an unflattering shade of pink.

“What confuses you?” The second she opened her mouth, however, Hermione cut her off again, shaking her head. “That was too ambitious a question. The hour is already late, and your answer would hardly be brief, would it? Allow me to make short work of enlightening you.”

She drew a line in the air between them.

“See this? *This is an invisible line*,” she explained slowly, as if to a small child. “One *just like this* exists between you and I, and I would *greatly* prefer it if you avoided crossing it, for if you do, I promise you that the consequences will prove thoroughly devastating to us both.” She pointed afar and added, “It’s just over there, if you would kindly back up.”

Several more sniggers broke out, even from Moody. Umbridge’s grubby eyes darted from face to face as though those of cornered prey tallying the number of predators closing in on it. The colour of her face had by now progressed past pink to resemble a Royal Gala apple.

“I — I am *deeply* apologetic if I have somehow offend—”

“Did I ask for an apology?” interrupted Hermione, tilting her head. She narrowed her eyes slightly. “No … I *believe* I asked you to back up … so if you would.” She waved her hand.

“Lady Nott, I implore you to —”

“Come now, we haven’t all night.”

After a moment, with clear reluctance, Umbridge began taking miniscule steps backwards. Hermione kept waving her hand until she had neared the doors on the other side of the lobby and, by brilliant coincidence, backed straight into Mr Lupin as he emerged from the theatre.

“Outstanding,” said Hermione softly, with a frigid smile. “Now, just there —” she pointed to spot on the floor just before the narrow, pink tips of Umbridge’s kitten heels, “— is the line. Do try to avoid toeing it.”

Umbridge shuffled back another inch. Beside her, Mr Lupin stopped and clasped his hands behind himself to watch the scene in what appeared to be idle fascination.

“Look at you … *learning* …” Hermione crooned. “You shall find, Madam Umbridge, that *theory* is worthless without practical application.”

She turned, all but shoved Tavaris’ donation at the witch manning the table, waved Wymond Selwyn and Sophronia Travers out of her way, and made a beeline for the stairs. Upon the gleaming railing rested a black beetle with green markings. She flicked it off.

Honestly, Umbridge and Skeeter both? There were limits to Hermione’s patience; right now, her supply of it was better used elsewhere.

As she passed the paned-glass doors of the terrace upstairs, her gaze caught on a lone, broad-shouldered figure standing in the darkness. A trail of cloudy white issued from him, half-breath and half-smoke, as he leaned against the bannister with a cigarette.

He turned slightly, and the light from the doors illuminated the rounded angles of his full face. To her surprise, it was Gawain Robards.

For a moment, Hermione lingered to watch him from afar. The thought struck her, suddenly and decisively, that to have a smoke with an old boss would be a pleasant thing to have done before one died.

Without much more thought than this, she tossed a glance behind her to be certain Abraxas remained occupied below (he seemed to be smoothing things over with Umbridge), then braced herself for the cold and stepped out onto the terrace.

At the sound of the doors, Robards turned fully to see who had joined him. He raised his thick eyebrows, taken aback. Drawing the cigarette from his mouth, he said politely, “Good evening, Lady Nott.”

“Good evening, Auror Robards,” she replied, coming to stand with him. It was warmer here; he must have cast a Hot-Air Charm. She raised a bemused eyebrow at him. “I was unaware that you smoked.”

Robards gave her a sheepish smile.

“A bad habit leftover from the war, I’m afraid,” he confessed, tapping the ash off his cigarette. “I did some work in the Muggle world, toward the end there, and I discovered it appears a lot less dodgy lingering alone in odd places if you’ve got a cigarette.”

“I suppose that *is* true, isn’t it?” said Hermione thoughtfully. “Very clever, sir.” Eyeing it as he brought it back to his mouth for a drag, she added tentatively, “Might you be willing to spare one?”

Robards startled so badly that he choked on his own smoke.

“If you’d honestly like, ma’am,” he croaked, once he had managed to stop spluttering. He reached into his dress robes for his pack and handed her one, laughing hoarsely in disbelief. He drew his wand to light it for her.

It was not nearly as harsh on her lungs as it had been the last time Hermione had one, on the day she had realised an early death was inevitable, regardless of what she did, so it hardly mattered if she teased it.

“I would never have expected …” Robards murmured faintly. “You realise, don’t you, that’s no good for you, that. No good for anyone,” he added, when she shot a pointed look at his own.

“Have you tried quitting?” she asked. She knew he would; he had never smoked in the future.

“An endless endeavour,” he sighed heavily. “I’d only ever intended to do it while I was on the job, and now here I am, sneaking them after supper every night. I swore to my girl when she moved in that she would never have to deal with anything to do with my work.”

He shook his head at himself, his expression rueful.

“I tell you,” he started fiercely, “the most *wicked* thing an Auror can ever do to their loved ones is —”

“— bring their work home with them,” Hermione finished with him automatically.

“*Precisely*!”

She smiled in wistful amusement. As she took another drag, she could almost envision Ron and Harry returning from Auror training, often drenched in sweat and running on pure adrenaline, and mimicking these exact words in impassioned exasperation, as they had stood gesturing wildly in the cramped kitchen of her and the former’s first flat.

“I — er — have to ask, Lady Nott,” Robards said after a moment, his forehead creasing deeply. He did not look at her. “H—how have you been?”

Hermione regarded him with sudden apprehension.

“How do you mean?”

“Well, I only wonder if you’ve been well,” he said, frowning at his cigarette. “You know, these past few years.”

She took a long drag before answering.

“I have been just fine, sir,” she said tersely. At a twinge of guilt, she added gently, “But don’t think I don’t appreciate your concern because I do.”

Robards nodded his head roughly. He blew a long stream of smoke out into the frosty night; it misted over the sparingly-illuminated expanse beyond the terrace, appearing to drift out amongst the lights of Tottenham Court in the near distance.

"I loathe to bring it up — please, stop me if you must — but …" He hesitated, still not looking at her. "I believe it might comfort you to know, and seeing as she's since passed … Just after the war, when several of those reports were filed against your husband concerning — well, I won't cause you the trouble of having to hear it again — you may know one of our informants chose to remain anonymous."

Emmeline Vance had explained as much during her interview. The reports had come from Remus, Pandora Lovegood, Mary Macdonald, Amelia Bones, and one unnamed other. Hermione was quite certain this information had only been revealed in an attempt to guilt trip her.

"I recall," she said warily.

"I was the one who received that report," Robards told her, finally lifting his gaze to her face. "It was the late Lady Morgan Travers."

Hermione stared at him.

"There was never an opportunity to tell you until now," he said quietly. "I'd just thought you might like to know that one of the last things she did while she was alive was try to help you — even if that help turned out be unnecessary, as it the case may be."

When she truly considered it, this was not terribly shocking; Morgan Travers had, after all, reported several titbits to Marlene during the war. All the same, Hermione never would have guessed.

Before she could begin to wonder what to say, the terrace doors opened, and she and Robards were joined by several high-spirited wizards all at once.

"Knew we'd find you out here, Robards!" Rufus Scrimgeour said.

"Got another of those?" Bronn Savage barked.

"'Course, he doesn't," John Dawlish snorted, elbowing Savage in the side. "That's his last one, don't you know?"

Altogether, they swarmed Robards, prodding goofily at his middle, ruffling his hair, and clapping him on the back. Gilford Proudfoot nicked the cigarette right from his mouth with a booming guffaw of triumph, causing Robards to splutter with indignance. It was Kingsley who noticed that Hermione was the person standing at Robards' side.

"Lady Nott," he said loudly, with the clear intention of making all their heads snap round. "I hadn't realised that was you."

Proudfoot was quick to dismount from Robards' back.

“Er — sorry, ma’am,” he muttered hastily.

“Yes, apologies,” said Dawlish, clearing his throat.

“Whatever are you doing out here?” asked Savage, in bewilderment. He was promptly smacked upside the head by Scrimgeour.

“Forgive our tomfoolery, Lady Nott,” he told Hermione civilly, as Savage scowled and rubbed the back of his head. “We got rather carried away there for a moment.”

“By all means, sir, get carried away,” she said. “I’d be a hypocrite to judge, seeing as I came out to bother Auror Robards for the same reason.”

“Oh, you could never be a bother, Lady Nott,” Robards rushed to interject, attempting to twist away from a pair of grabby hands. “Not in the slightest!”

“Savage here is the bother,” added Proudfoot.

Savage, who had begun rummaging through a harried Robards’ pockets for cigarettes, jerked his head up with an exclamation of affront.

“See? Scrappy little bugger.”

“Watch your mouth, Proudfoot, would you?”

“Yeah, you’re in the presence of a lady! Now I realise that’s a bit new for you but —”

“Oi!”

The scene was so mirthfully familiar, Hermione could not help but be entertained by it. She leaned back against the bannister beside Kingsley as, at last, Savage managed to relieve Robards of his cigarettes. He danced away, holding the pack out of reach, to distribute them.

“Go on, then,” he encouraged, at Kingsley’s reluctant expression. “Everybody knows it doesn’t count when it’s Muggle.”

“Doesn’t count when you’ve had as much to drink as Proudfoot has!” Dawlish corrected him laughingly, which resulted in Proudfoot promptly ramming into him from the side. Both their cigarettes went flying.

“Oi! Watch it!” shouted Savage, just barely dodging as the pair went careening past him onto the flagstone.

“I assure you, Lady Nott, such ill-mannered behaviour never occurs within the Auror pit,” Scrimgeour told Hermione solemnly. “My colleagues and I have merely made the mistake of overindulging this evening.”

“Yes, we’re normally — OW — *bloody hell*, *you brass-knuckled troll* — very professional!” Dawlish cried out breathlessly from the ground.

She did not believe them for a second; she had seen too much.

“We are lucky enough not to be among those on duty, you see.”

“We picked names out of a hat,” Kingsley explained candidly.

“As long as someone remains to look after the state of things,” said Hermione, starting to grin, “I don’t suppose it’s the end of the world if a handful of you are a state yourselves for an evening.”

“Now see here, Scrimgeour, it’s all fine and dandy,” Savage said breezily, gesturing to her with his lit cigarette. “She merely finds us amusing. So long as you can get a witch to grin like that —”

“I’d end that sentence there if I were you,” she warned.

Kingsley chuckled through an exhale of billowing smoke. Even now, it had not ceased to astonish Hermione how young he looked; how young all of them looked, for that matter. Not to mention, acted.

Just then, the doors opened again.

Somehow, she was unsurprised.

“Good evening, Mr Travers,” she said casually.

Some of the laughter fizzled out. Scrimgeour frowned and craned his neck to look behind himself.

Carden Travers approached the group somewhat apprehensively, his eyes flitting between them all as he took in the scene before him. He was carrying a tumbler of sloshing, amber liquid.

“All right, Lady Mione?” he asked, stopping as near to her as he could get with Scrimgeour and Savage in the way.

Hermione smiled with pleasure. If anything had the power to make him feel wrong-footed, finding her surrounded by a lively bunch of young Aurors was definitely it.

“Never better,” she said.

“I think I pulled something,” grunted Dawlish, who had at last managed to extricate himself from Proudfoot’s supposedly brass-knuckled grasp. He dusted off his dress robes, which did little for his dishevelled appearance, considering his blue bowtie was hooked round his left ear.

Proudfoot, meanwhile, was missing a shoe. Before he could put it back on, Savage pulled out his wand and sent the shoe rising several feet into the air and hurling over the bannister. Robards managed to slow its descent before anyone on the street below wound up concussed.

“Robards, you rusty-hinged door, you could’ve Summoned it back!”

“I couldn’t, though, could I?” he said, tucking his wand away again. “A flying shoe? What would the Muggles think?”

“Can’t afford any mishaps at the moment,” Kingsley said reasonably. “Half the Obliviators are already three sheets to the wind.”

“Not to mention the Head of the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee is —” Savage sniffed purposefully, “— having himself a very merry Christmas in the loo right now.”

“Have you got a cold, Savage?” said Scrimgeour, in warning.

“I fear you’ll have to pop down and fetch it yourself,” Dawlish told Proudfoot, with mocking regret.

In the wake of all this, Carden appeared quite out of his element.

Therefore, it was tremendously disappointing how rapidly he managed to regain his footing. Within a few seconds, he had affected an air of cool curiosity and squeezed himself smoothly through the gap between Scrimgeour and Savage to stand directly in front of Hermione.

“It seems I was right, then,” he murmured, holding her gaze steadily. “You *do* fancy a spot of impropriety.”

To her utter astonishment, he proceeded to remove the cigarette from her lips and bring it slowly to his own for a long drag, never once breaking eye-contact.

“Blimey,” said Dawlish dumbly.

Savage threw his head back and howled with shocked laughter, whilst Proudfoot wolf-whistled and Robards made an odd, choking noise at the back of his throat. Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Kingsley gaping. She thought she might have been as well.

“Have you no shame?” she asked Carden dazedly.

He drew the cigarette away to exhale and grinned impishly.

“Would you like me to have shame?”

Kingsley snorted so loudly he seemed to startle himself.

“I dunno about you lot,” Proudfoot piped up, “but I’d loathe to be *her* husband right about now.”

Carden glanced back at him briefly.

“I’m lucky none of you like him, then,” he said flippantly.

At this, even Scrimgeour started cracking up.

With a start, Hermione realised it was true; not one of these Aurors likely had even an ounce of respect for Tavaris, so why would any of them ever say anything? Unlike Carden, however, she knew from experience that this would be a prime anecdote in the Auror pit tomorrow morning. She could already imagine Savage hovering idly by Moody's cubicle and waiting until he had just taken a large swig from his poison-resistant hip-flask before saying abruptly, "So Travers' little brother was chatting up Nott's wife last night."

Savage possessed an intense passion for making people spray spit all over their paperwork. Hermione had always privately suspected it was caused by some form of generational bitterness from being the first exception in a long line of deeply serious paper-pushers.

"Speaking of Tavaris, he's bound to be wondering what's taking me so long," she said, "so if you would excuse me, gentlemen —"

"Oh, yeah, wouldn't want to give him the impression he's got something to worry about," said Savage, mockingly solemn.

"Will he be?" asked Kingsley, with too much nonchalance. "Worried, that is."

Suddenly, he, Robards, Scrimgeour, and Dawlish were all looking at her very closely.

Hermione kept her face impassive.

"That it took me over ten minutes just to return from the donation table because I was hanging about with a bunch of strapping young Aurors like yourselves?" she said lightly. "Yes, I should think that would make any wizard worry slightly."

Proudfoot downright giggled.

"I'm a strapping young Auror," he chortled gleefully.

Carden reached past Hermione to stamp the cigarette out on the bannister. "I'll escort you," he said, discarding it carelessly. He downed the rest of his drink and left the empty tumbler on the bannister before offering his arm.

There was another wolf-whistle — probably from Proudfoot again — as Hermione let him lead her back inside. She rolled her eyes.

"I'll admit, you've caught me by surprise," Carden said once they were out of earshot, the terrace doors sweeping shut behind them. "I had no idea you were so friendly with the Aurors."

Hermione would have hated for him to get suspicious about the wrong motive, so she bent her head toward him and murmured slyly, "I like having people who whisper things in my ear."

It worked.

"So you like secrets, then," he murmured back, smirking.

“I am very much a fan.”

“Good to know.”

“Why, have you got any for me?” she asked coyly.

Carden kept his gaze fixed ahead, steering them both toward the east wing and past the security troll. The corridor beyond was empty, save for them and the muffled sounds of the ongoing performance.

“Maybe one or two,” he replied, his smirk stretching into a wide, toothy grin. “What secrets did the Aurors have for you?”

That your mother snitched to the Aurors for me before she died.

“I couldn’t possibly tell *you* that, Mr Travers.” Hermione lowered her voice to barely a murmur. “*You* are a *Death Eater*. You cannot be trusted.”

He laughed freely, slowing his steps. In one smooth movement, he had stopped and spun her round to stand in front of him.

Her heart dropped to her stomach.

“I suppose that’s true,” he said, holding her close by the elbows. She felt herself being backed up slowly. “*You* can trust me, though, with any of *your* secrets.” Her back hit the wall gently, and he leaned in close, his lips hovering beside her ear. “*And I have a few things I could whisper in your ear myself if you’d like*.”

Good God, she thought with a shiver. *No shame at all.*

“I imagine you have a lot of things you’ve imagined whispering in my ear,” she replied, trying not to stiffen in discomfort. “But right now, I am in the mood for secrets, so whisper one of those.”

Smirking, he leaned in to whisper again.

“*I helped handle the McKinnon problem*.”

Hermione fought hard to keep her expression from wavering.

“Not a secret, I fear. I already knew that one. Try again.”

“Again?” he said, his eyes glittering with amusement.

“If at first you don’t succeed …”

Carden hummed softly and glanced away, becoming pensive. After a moment, an idea must have come to him; he looked at her again, his expression disconcertingly grave.

“Geoffrey Mulciber comes round your place fairly regularly, does he not?”

“I wouldn’t say he’s there *regularly*,” said Hermione, wondering where this would lead, “but on occasion, yes.”

“If I were Nott, I wouldn’t let him round at all,” said Carden, in a cold voice. As though swearing a promise to her, he added vehemently, “Not with a child living there whom I’m meant to be protecting.”

A sense of unease spread slowly up her spine.

“He’s a *pervert*,” he nearly spat, sneering.

Now Hermione could not stop herself from stiffening, but it had nothing to do with discomfort. To the forefront of her mind came a memory from that dreaded Hallowe’en night, when Tavaris, in a rage, had called Geoffrey a “stupid fucking sodomite.” Were *pervert* and *homosexual* interchangeable in these circles? Carefully, she unclenched her teeth.

“How do you mean?” she asked Carden frostily.

“You know Alastor Moody, I presume?”

She was taken aback.

“Obviously.”

“And you’ve heard what happened to his family?”

She nodded haltingly. “Murdered in their own home,” she murmured, nonplussed. “An anonymous tip-off to the Auror Office ensured that Auror Moody would be out of the house when it happened. A false lead, I heard,” she added furtively, after a second, to show that she knew it had been a plot by the Death Eaters.

In truth, she only knew this because Leon McKinnon had once implied it whilst shooting Tavaris a sidelong glance, and Tavaris had very tellingly pretended not to notice.

“According to my father, it was Mulciber and Nott who showed up at their house.”

Hermione’s mouth became suddenly very dry.

“Nott took care of Moody’s wife, though she didn’t exactly make it easy for him,” Carden went on, keeping his voice low. “She was an Auror herself, you know. One of the ones Canada sent over after that Mudblood Nobby Leach checked out of office early — or fell mysteriously ill, as the case may be. My father still reckons Abraxas Malfoy was behind that one.”

“Those are the rumours,” Hermione murmured faintly. She knew she was staring blankly, but she could not wipe the dumb look off her face. “Y—you said your father told you all this?”

“He overheard Nott telling Malfoy about it later that night,” said Carden. “Nott was all shaky and pale when they returned, wouldn’t even look Mulciber in the eye. Thinking it strange, my father followed Nott and Malfoy when they left the room. Apparently, Mulciber was meant to

take care of the little girl — should have been quick and easy, she was only about five or six — but it turned out that he had other plans for her first."

Hermione thought she might be sick. She closed her mouth quickly, forcing herself to swallow back the scorching bile rising in her throat.

"Luckily for her, Nott had finished her mother off in time to find them," he continued darkly. "He got her with the Killing Curse before Mulciber had the chance to get started."

The air had thickened, suddenly too heavy to draw breath from. She gripped one of Carden's arms to keep herself from sliding against the wall.

"Despicable, isn't it?" he sneered, in a venomous voice. "And Nott's completely aware. He oughtn't be allowing Mulciber anywhere *near* your son."

He doesn't, she thought in horror. Whenever Geoffrey was about, he steered well clear of Theodore. She doubted he had ever even spoken to Theodore before. She had long found it strange, but now she suspected that Tavaris had warned Geoffrey to maintain his distance. He was never too near Draco, either, now that she thought about it, so Abraxas must have given him a warning as well.

Carden leaned back to regard her.

"I thought you ought to know," he finished shortly.

"I … erm … a—appreciate your telling me," Hermione managed, her voice thick. She gulped back more bile, digging her fingernails into his arm momentarily as she attempted to steel herself. Finally, she felt steady enough to walk and brushed him off, grateful when he stepped back to give her space.

She pinched her cheeks to hopefully restore some of their colour, took as deep a breath as she could, and re-entered the box.

Everyone looked up at her entrance.

"Terribly sorry," she muttered hastily, as she retook her seat, "I bumped into a rather rowdy group of drunken Aurors on my way back."

"Nothing that needs to be reported, I hope," said Crouch, in mild concern.

She shook her head quickly.

"No, but if you happen to spot Auror Proudfoot with one less shoe than he had fifteen minutes ago, know that it was only partly his own fault."

"They do seldom have the opportunity to enjoy themselves, those boys," Elphias remarked, with a sigh.

"Are you well, darling?" she heard Tavaris ask in an undertone.

Hermione wished she could simply cite "women's troubles" and be done with it, but Dinky did all her washing; if Tavaris was suspicious enough, he could easily fact-check.

She gave him a tiny nod instead and stared at her full plate as conversation whirled about her in dizzying contrast to the music of the performance. Distantly, she recognised that this was probably what Carden had intended by telling her — to drive a wedge between her and Tavaris. Right now, however, his motives were of no consequence to her.

For the next two courses, she could not stomach a single bite. Rather than attempt it and risk vomiting right there at the table, she picked up her wine and steadily drained it till the last drop.

Even then, it was not nearly enough.

There was no trace of peace to be had, brewed or otherwise, now that she knew what she knew, especially with Moody just downstairs, knowing none of it. But, she supposed, without that one dose of the Draught of Peace, there was no way she would have been able to walk past Moody on the way out of the theatre roughly two hours later.

For the entirety of the drive back to the Nott Estate, she could sense Tavaris' eyes on her. Unable to look at him, she stared out her window and watched blindly, her stomach continuously churning, as the city lights grew sparse and eventually vanished, replaced by the darkened countryside. Tavaris did not say a word, though she knew several hovered in anticipation on the tip of his tongue. He waited, as she expected him to, for them to reach the Nott Estate.

The car could still be heard rumbling away in the distance when he cut in front of her, effectively bringing them both to a stop.

"What is it?" he asked without preamble.

"What did you do to that wizard?" Hermione asked, watching the car disappear down the road. "The server?"

"I removed the curse, for a start. I also altered his memories." Tavaris paused briefly. "Is that not what you wanted me to do, Mione?"

"No, that's — that's —" She shook her head. "Is he alright?"

"In a manner of speaking."

Hermione cast her gaze low. She tried to speak again but the words got caught in her throat, so instantaneously that she could not grasp what they might have been.

"Mione, darling," said Tavaris, unmoving. "Look at me."

She shook her head again, tightly.

"*Mione*." He reached for her; on instinct, she jerked back, shaking her head again. She heard him sigh in frustration.

And then his hand shot out again. When he seized her wrist, she turned her head down and angled her body away. He stepped closer, peering down at her face, and she squeezed her eyes shut.

“Stop it, please,” she said, in a pained voice. “I beg you, Tavaris, please don’t make me look at you right now.”

He breathed deeply, his grip tightening.

“Mione,” he started, and she could tell that he was trying to be patient, “what has happened? I thought you wanted to come tonight. You *asked* to attend with me, if you recall. I did not force you to.”

When she did not say anything, he let go of her wrist, only to grab her by the jaw the next second.

“For fuck’s sake, Mione, *look at me* when I am speaking to you!”

She squeezed her eyes shut tighter.

“*Really*?” he said acidly. “Is this how it’s going to be tonight, then? Is it?” He jostled her jaw, his fingers biting. “*Speak*! You possess an unnatural talent for it so I cannot reason what’s stopping you now.”

But Hermione could not make herself do it; she could not confront it, not head-on like this. She could not open her eyes when she knew the first thing that she would see was his face looming over her, cold and sneering.

Tavaris swore under his breath and released her roughly; she stumbled back a few paces, gasping and blinking rapidly to reorient herself. Once she regained her footing, she put her back to him and covered her mouth with her hand, whimpering into her palm.

“Did —?” she started after a second, lowering her hand, but she had to shut her mouth again to hold back a sob. A small choking noise escaped her instead.

“Did — what?” he mocked jerkily. “Did what, Mione?”

“*Did you —*?” she began again, more determinedly, and she huffed, tilting her face up toward the blackened sky to keep the tears from slipping free. She took a deep breath to brace herself. “Did you kill Moody’s wife and daughter?”

The answering silence was excruciating.

“*Did — you — kill them*?”

Tavaris made not even a sound. Hermione knew, if she were to turn in that moment, she would find him standing perfectly still, his face blank.

“What were their names?” she asked.

He shifted his weight then. His walking-stick ground into the gravel.

“Collette,” he said finally. “Auror Collette Sherbourne Moody.”

It felt like a confession, the way he said it.

“And the little girl?” Hermione asked, still not turning.

“Mirabelle.”

Her face crumpled. The feeling was akin to a sharp, twisting pain in her gut; she nearly keeled over from it, her shoulders hunching.

“How old was she, Tavaris?”

“Six,” he said softly.

“Fuck,” she breathed, closing her eyes again. Her voice came out thick and straining. “You keep track, don’t you? Of all the people you’ve killed? You would. I mean, God, you write it down when you’ve gotten a haircut, you keep track of everything.”

“I keep track,” he confirmed, at length, speaking very quietly now. “By my own definition.”

“You mean you don’t count the Muggles.”

“No. I do not.”

Hermione drew a sharp, shuddering breath. She wiped roughly at her eyes, though it made little difference.

“Goblins?” she had to ask.

“I have never killed any goblins.”

So he had not been behind the murder of that goblin family from the county. *Small mercies.*

She sniffled. “What’s the number?” she asked bluntly.

“I do not believe you truly want me to answer that, Mione.”

“Answer it, anyway.”

“No, darling,” said Tavaris. “I won’t.”

“But you killed them — Collette and Mirabelle Moody, that was you.” She waited, then added, her voice wavering now, “Tavaris, I need you to say it.”

A long moment passed. Somewhere in the night, an owl hooted. Eventually, the silence had stretched too long to bear; she turned slowly and, at last, looked up at him.

Numbly pale in the cold, shadowed under the New Moon, sharp at every edge; it was the face of a killer. From the first time she had ever laid eyes on him, Hermione had known this.

Funny, it should still shock her.

Funny, it should hurt like this every time.

Funny, but not in the slightest.

Tavaris gave her a small nod of confirmation.

"Christmas Eve of 'seventy-four," he said. "Nearly ten years ago to the day."

And then he watched, not moving an inch, as she doubled over, sobbing into her hand. He must have been burning to ask who had told her, but he held back. Instead, after a minute, he asked, "What do you need?"

With effort, she lifted her head to stare at him, uncomprehending.

"*W—what*?" she choked.

"I cannot change the past, Mione," he said plainly. "So, tell me, what do you need right now?"

She struggled to take a deep breath.

"I need to be able to look at you without feeling as though I'll vomit before Theodore wakes up."

Tavaris merely nodded. He drew his wand and Conjured a brown leather armchair, right in the middle of the gravel drive. With another wave of his wand, he Conjured a second armchair, this one squashy and blue and materialising directly behind her. Without a word, he sat down, propped up his walking-stick, and settled in to wait.

Several minutes passed in near silence before Hermione, too, sat down. She drew her coat more securely about herself to fend off the cold. He waved his wand again to release a rippling spell of hot air between them; the warmth settled heavily on her shoulders.

It could have been an hour that they spent sat there before Goppy emerged from the house with a blanket for her to drape over her lap. Eventually, he brought them each a cup of tea, piping hot liquid drained slower than it cooled, and then he came back to collect the empty teacups. All the while, neither Hermione nor Tavaris uttered so much as a word. She only stared at him, and he stared back, unflinching.

As the sky began to lighten with the approaching dawn, Hermione asked finally, "How do you do it?"

Tavaris barely blinked.

"Do what?"

“How do you make me forget that you’re capable of monstrosity?”

“I do not make you forget anything, Mione,” he said frankly. “I let you do it to yourself.”

Hermione nodded shortly, sniffling. She wiped her nose on the back of her hand. Her eyes, at least, had long been dry. As though her breaking of the silence had given him leave to move, Tavaris shifted on his chair with a wince, his limbs likely gone stiff.

“I wish I had gotten a full night’s sleep,” she told him honestly, after a minute, “so I’d have the energy to come up with the words to sufficiently describe to you how deeply I hate you right now.”

“Rest this mornin’,” he replied, through a wide, jaw-cracking yawn. “Describe it to me in the afternoon.”

“Fuck you,” she whispered. “I hate you … *so much*.”

“I know, darling. But you can hate me after getting some sleep, too.”

Hermione rubbed her eyes tiredly. As if triggered by his own, she, too, yawned. At long last, she heaved herself to her feet and started up the drive toward the house, dragging her feet with exhaustion. Tavaris followed her silently, from a distance.

It could, at times, prove an unexpectedly dangerous pursuit: the search for answers. One never knew what one might find.

Sometimes, Hermione may wish she had never found it at all.

Fear of a Name

Chapter Summary

> Oh, what a shame my tongue's not tied
> You can do whatever you want
> I'll do whatever I like
> — Angry Woman, Ashe

Chapter Notes

> CW: implied/referenced (past) rape/non-con, but otherwise very delightful. Including the Minor Character Death.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione slept away the entirety of the morning, and some of the afternoon. She suspected that Tavaris had warned the household that she was not to be disturbed, since not even Theodore tiptoed in to wake her. Only Crookshanks had slipped inside; upon blinking awake, she discovered him stretched out at the foot of the bed, belly-up, with his head resting on her ankle over the blankets. Perhaps he had sensed somehow that she longed for someone familiar.

It was nearing two o'clock when she emerged from her bedroom, her hollow stomach growling, to find Tavaris and Theodore having a late lunch in the informal dining room. With a gesture to the latter to stay put, Tavaris stepped out to meet her, though he did not come very close; it was from a careful distance that he regarded her. Like before, he must have been burning with questions, but, like before, he asked only one.

"Better?"

"No worse," Hermione answered honestly.

"I suppose that is all I could hope for," Tavaris said plainly, and then he gestured behind himself. "There's a plate for you, if you're hungry."

So she joined him and Theodore for lunch, because, at this moment, there was nothing else that could be done without disrupting the timeline. Justice for Moody's family, like so many others, would have to wait. When that day of reckoning came, she hoped that if the dead could gaze down upon the living, Moody would forgive her for not saying anything whilst he

was still alive to hear it. Of all people, he would surely understand what had hung in the balance.

"You made the *Prophet*, you know," Tavaris informed her in a conversational tone of voice, as she stirred milk silently into her tea.

"Did I?" she muttered distractedly.

"'*Senior Legislator Publicly Humiliated By Wizengamot Wife*.'"

Her teaspoon *clinked* against the rim of her teacup.

"There's even a picture of you rolling your eyes!" said Theodore delightedly.

"We were just discussing framing it," said Tavaris.

Bloody Skeeter, Hermione thought with an annoyed grimace. Sighing, she propped her elbows up on the table and massaged her temples. Her head ached. Now that she had gotten a few hours of attempted recovery, her mind had begun to race again.

And, presently, there was a far more pressing matter at hand than irksome little insects like Rita Skeeter and Dolores Umbridge, or the murderer sipping his tea in the next seat. The information on Tavaris was not all Carden Travers had revealed to Hermione the night before; he had also revealed precisely why one of Tavaris' closest friends had always steered clear of Theodore.

Food was one of the five exceptions of Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration; despite knowing this, a part of Hermione longed to Transfigure Geoffrey Mulciber into a stick of butter, leave him out on the counter on a hot summer day, and then slice into him slowly with a knife.

Tavaris knew. Abraxas knew. Perhaps even Edmund Lestrange and Elias Avery had known. But if none of them had told their wives, then Desdemona would not have known. Therefore, no one would have warned Madam Zabini. And very soon, she and her four-year-old son would be moving in to the Mulciber family home, however temporarily.

The planning of a grand affair had been in the works for many months, but at Tavaris' and Abraxas' point-blank refusal to attend, Geoffrey elected to save himself from the humiliation of explaining to guests why his closest friends were boycotting his wedding. Without warning, he eloped with Madam Zabini a mere three days later, whilst everyone was still laid up in bed after overindulging at Christmas Day dinner.

Thus, time was of the essence.

Under no circumstances could Geoffrey be allowed to survive his honeymoon. After what Carden had insinuated that he had tried to do to six-year-old Mirabelle Moody, it was clear to Hermione that Geoffrey could never reside under the same roof as Blaise, and she was willing to get her hands dirty to ensure it.

Any message that she attempted, by herself, to send to Madam Zabini would be intercepted. There was the option of the post office in Diagon Alley, but even during the week that followed Christmas, it would be swarmed with people picking up packages from loved ones. She could not be seen there, for if Tavaris caught on to her making use of it, the restrictions on her post would undoubtedly tighten.

Therefore, what she needed was access to Blaise.

Whilst Theodore could beg all he wanted and Tavaris would still likely refuse to allow Blaise over to play, Draco had much more sway over his own father. Hermione only had to put the thought in Draco's head. During a small dinner party at Malfoy Manor just two days after Geoffrey and Madam Zabini had embarked upon their honeymoon in the South of France, she whispered to Draco about what a marvellous time he would have if Blaise were to come round the manor to play.

"Just think," she whispered to him, as everyone indulged in pre-dinner drinks, "you could show Blaise *all* the new toys you got for Christmas. I'd wager he would be *quite* jealous …"

Draco's cool, grey eyes widened with a zealous gleam.

And when he promptly voiced his demand, and Abraxas gave him a resounding, "No," he proceeded to throw a tantrum of epic proportions.

It took less than five minutes for Lucius to fold.

On the fourth day of the honeymoon, Blaise was dropped off at Malfoy Manor by his so-called "Auntie Dee," who knew better than to linger. Desdemona did not step beyond the front doors and left with the promise to return that evening to collect Blaise, according to Narcissa, who recounted their brief interaction with distaste shortly after Hermione and Theodore arrived.

"You have not made her acquaintance, either, have you, Mione?" Narcissa said, as Dobby delivered them tea service in the drawing room. "This 'Auntie Dee' character. Daniella, was it?"

"I have not," Hermione lied.

"She did not give the impression of someone especially socialised," said Narcissa, with a haughty sniff. "Her hair is unseasonably red."

"*Unseasonably* red?" repeated Hermione, a little incredulous.

"It was practically *crimson*."

She supposed that was one way to alter one's appearance.

With anxious anticipation, she waited until Blaise tired of Theodore's and Draco's combined antics, which, that day, involved a spectacular row over a game of Exploding Snap, because the former kept knocking the cards down purposely to trigger an explosion and the latter was having none of it. At about the same time that Narcissa stepped out to take a Floo call in the

study, the bickering got to be too much of a bother for Blaise. Just as Hermione had hoped, he came shuffling over to her for entertainment.

“You must miss your mother terribly,” she murmured gently, as he slumped against her side on the sofa with all the usual melodrama of a bored four-year-old. “You know, I may have an idea of something that just might help.”

Blaise glanced up at her, his interest piqued.

“Why don’t I help you write her a letter?”

“Really?” he asked, with wide, eager eyes.

“Of course,” Hermione smiled, wiping a bit of chocolate off his cheek with her thumb. She then paused, wondering how he had managed to get his hands on chocolate.

She turned her head to look back at Theodore and Draco, who were now hiding very suspiciously behind Abraxas’ favourite armchair.

She huffed and shook her head dismissively. *Not right now.* Looking at Blaise again, she asked, “So, what do you say? Shall we write her a letter?”

He nodded his head urgently.

Kindly, Dobby fetched them some parchment, a quill, and a pot of ink. Together, Hermione and Blaise sat on the rug before the coffee table and drafted the letter. As impressive as his penmanship was for his age, and although his overall spelling was far from mediocre, the simple knowledge of when or when not to capitalise a letter still evaded him. So, when he was writing what he had eaten for dinner the night before, she informed him that the “P” in *potato* ought to be upper-case; as did the “A” in *day*; the “E” in *Theo*; the “D” in *do*; the “O” in *Draco*; the first “P” in *happy*; the “H” in *how*; the “I” in *ice-cream*; the second “L” in *little*; and the “E” in *the*.

It was the sloppy spelling of a small child. No one would think much of it beyond that.

But a mother knew her own child.

Instinctively, Madam Zabini would know that Blaise had not written this alone, and she would know, too, once she put the randomly capitalised letters together, what Hermione was trying to tell her: *PAEDOPHILE.*

Within no more than ten minutes of finishing it, the letter was successfully sent off by an unsuspecting Narcissa without triggering a single alarm bell.

As Blaise re-joined Theodore and Draco, Hermione sat back on the sofa with a sense of grim satisfaction. Even between the bickering, their shared laughter echoed, high and elated and utterly unharmed, throughout the spacious, sunlit room. For now, at least, it would stay that way.

Madam Zabini was quick about it.

A mere four days after Hemione had helped Blaise write the letter, the news struck. It had rather a lovely ring to it, the headline: *BOATING ACCIDENT BRINGS HONEYMOON TO TRAGIC END: LORD MULCIBER DEAD AT FIFTY-EIGHT*.

One moment, Tavaris was settled comfortably at the head of the table, listening distractedly to Theodore's chatter and lifting his morning tea for an absent-minded sip as he unravelled the *Prophet* one-handedly before himself. The next moment, the teacup was soaring straight down the length of the table and hitting the far wall with a shrill, instantaneous *SMASH*.

Hermione flinched at the sound, whilst Theodore shrieked in alarm and cowered in his chair, covering his head with his hands. The sharp *tinkling* of broken chinaware clattering to the floor filled the room.

And then, a ringing silence.

Tavaris clung to the edge of the table with a white-knuckled grip, his head hung low over his plate. His shoulders rose and fell heavily. Without tearing her eyes from him, Hermione said in an even voice, "Theodore, my love, go to your room, please. Dinky will bring your plate up to you shortly."

"But —"

"Now, Theodore."

"But I don't understand!" he cried imploringly, sounding frightened. "What's happened? Why —?"

"Dinky!" The second she heard the *pop*, she said shortly, "Take Theodore to the nursery and stay with him there."

"Y—yes, Mistress," she heard Dinky say stiltedly. There was a tinge of wariness in their voice. "I does that right … right away …"

Although Theodore protested, another soft *pop* signalled their departure from the informal dining room a few seconds later.

Hermione did not move. Stiffly, she waited.

Tavaris' shoulders started to shake. The sight alone made her own shoulders tense. Soon, however, a small, watery noise escaped him, half-choke and half-sniffle, and it became clear that he was not shaking from rage, but tears.

And his tears, Hermione could handle.

With caution, she stood from her seat and approached his side. She placed a hand gingerly on the back of his head and, when he did not react, began to stroke his hair. After a minute, his hands unclenched, slipping from the table, and he slumped against her, shaking harder still.

"That —" his voice caught, and he gulped down a breath that went shuddering through his whole body, "— *fucking idiot* …"

Sighing inaudibly, she wrapped her arms around him and shifted to stand between him and the table, blocking his view of the *Prophet*. Almost at once, his arms were circling her waist. She carried on smoothing a hand over his head.

"*I fucking … I fucking told him … I fucking told him so …*" Tavaris mumbled tearfully against her chest. "*Pathetic*. Utterly, utterly *pathetic* …" He made a weak, incredulous noise. "Twice … How has this h—happened *twice*? Not … not one but *two* of my oldest friends … have now been *murdered* by their wives …"

"You needn't feel left out," said Hermione. "There's still time."

He paused. Slowly, he tilted his head to look up at her, his lips parted and his eyes red-rimmed and glistening with tears.

"What a wicked thing to say," he breathed, in disbelief.

She gave a small shrug and kept stroking his hair.

"You would have laughed, regardless, if you were in only slightly higher spirits," she said frankly.

"I —" Tavaris hesitated, falling silent. He dropped his head again with a heavy sigh. "No, I would have."

It could not have been much longer than a few minutes before the *whoosh* of the Floo sounded in the distance, shortly followed by Abraxas' hoarse shouts.

"Tavaris! Have you seen the *Prophet*? Tav—"

Hermione glanced over her shoulder just in time to see Abraxas skid to a halt at the threshold of the room. His eyes darted from the shards of china to the milky, splattered stain on the speckled grey wallpaper, still lazily dripping tea.

He turned his head to look at her and Tavaris, his mouth opening and closing noiselessly. He was still in his black velvet dressing gown and slippers, and his thinning, white hair was in uncharacteristic disarray, as though he had been running his hands through it repeatedly. Like Tavaris', his pale eyes were abnormally bright.

"I … I thought we'd have more time," he said, in a small, helplessly dumbfounded voice. "Her last two had years … *whole years* … What happened?"

Hermione peered behind her at the front page.

"Drunken stumble on a slippery deck, apparently."

"You know full well that is *not* what I meant!" snapped Abraxas. "*This* —" he jabbed a furious finger at the *Prophet*, "— is too soon. It's downright sloppy! Why on earth is she suddenly being sloppy?"

At last, Tavaris lifted his head and drew back slightly within Hermione's embrace. Hidden from Abraxas' sight, he took out a handkerchief and dried his face.

"Years! We could have had years!" Abraxas yelled hoarsely. "We could have *done* something!"

"We still can," said Tavaris thickly, sitting back.

"No, you cannot," said Hermione immediately. Crossing her arms, she leaned back against the table and looked at him squarely. "In all likelihood, her son will be attending Hogwarts alongside Theodore and Draco. Do not make it so that they must go through seven years of wondering if their father and grandfather had a hand in killing the mother of the boy sleeping soundly in the next bed over."

"We would never leave it up to wonder," Abraxas muttered, sounding affronted.

She glanced back at him coolly.

"Like you never left Nobby Leach up to wonder?"

He scoffed derisively.

"Nobby Leach fell ill," he sneered. "How would I have even gone about manufacturing an entirely new magical illness?"

Hermione looked at Tavaris and said nothing. Her stomach roiled.

"Who's to say he will be in the same House as them?" asked Tavaris.

"It would be bad enough even if he's not," she replied firmly. "Blaise Zabini will still be in the same year as them both. No matter the House, the three of them will share classes at some point."

She looked between him and Abraxas, her face hardened.

"Theodore and Draco are not idiots. And they listen to what you say a whole lot more than you realise. Trust me, they would suspect, and the older they get, the closer to certainty they would be. You want to avenge Geoffrey, I understand that. And, sure, killing Madam Zabini may solve your problem, but that is only because it will not be *your* problem anymore. If you kill the mother of one of Theodore and Draco's classmates, you will be making this *their* problem — *their* guilt, *their* ghost. Those boys have done nothing wrong. Unlike you, they have committed no crimes. They have harmed *no one*. Do you truly want them to grow up feeling as though they have?"

Neither Tavaris nor Abraxas said anything after that.

Nevertheless, Hermione held tight to the former's hand at the wake a few days later, preventing him from drawing his wand. It would be poor form to attempt to murder a widow at her late husband's wake, most particularly whilst in the presence of the full Wizengamot and the Minister for Magic herself.

In a shadowy corner of the drearily dull drawing room in the Mulciber family home, located roughly a mile outside the village of Upper Flagley, Tavaris and Abraxas found themselves a pair of squashy armchairs to settle on and watch the other guests go by in silence. Even then, Hermione stood tall between them, refusing to loosen her grasp on Tavaris' hand. Evangeline hovered as well, her pale, angular features drawn tight in a tensely preoccupied expression. She saw to it that their free hands were always filled with a tumbler of firewhiskey.

"They don't allow post at Azkaban," Gaspar murmured to Hermione over Tavaris' head, after he and Bedelia had arrived. "How will Angus even know his father's dead? Will anyone tell him?"

"Likely not," Hermione murmured back. "But wouldn't it be easier on him if he doesn't know? Honestly, imagine learning a thing like this in a place like that."

Gaspar sighed, looking conflicted. Bedelia rubbed his back in wordless comfort. She resembled a mourner more than Madam Zabini did, funnily enough; her attire was simple and plain, her face was wan, and the flaxen shine of her hair seemed almost to have dulled slightly, though perhaps this was owed to the dim lighting. Even on the other side of the windows, the January sky stretched drab and grey overhead.

In comparison, Madam Zabini — who was currently clasping hands with Rohesia Selwyn on the other side of the drawing room — had dressed herself in a black lace shroud of excessive length and slim-fitting black robes that had a gaudy, sweeping train which Algie Longbottom nearly tripped on as he cut behind her on his way to the drinks table. The macabre opulence of the outfit was, frankly, tasteless.

"… dreadfully lacking in any tact at all," Hermione overheard Narcissa whispering to Fiona Selwyn and Euphemia Rowle nearby.

"Just goes to show how incorrigible her sort are," the latter drawled, with a disdainful glance at Madam Zabini.

Fiona sniffed haughtily. "Ambition is such a ghastly look."

"Utterly deplorable."

"Do you need to sit down?" Gaspar asked Bedelia, in an undertone.

She did not answer. After a moment, he Conjured a straight-backed chair and helped her to sit.

"Are you alright, Bedelia?" asked Hermione, in concern.

Bedelia opened her mouth to respond, but Gaspar beat her to it.

"She's been unwell lately. But Healer Gibbon expects swift improvement, given that she rests."

Hermione's lips flattened into a grim line. She could more than imagine now what had been causing Bedelia's brief and recurring declines in health; although Hatley Gibbon was

proficient in treating many maladies and injuries, she specialised in maternity.

“Oh, my dear boys, I am so sorry!” said Professor Slughorn, appearing abruptly in front of them all with a devasted expression. “Deeply, deeply sorry.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Abraxas, in a tight voice, whilst Tavaris inclined his head in acknowledgement. “We appreciate your sympathy.”

“It is greater than sympathy, m’boy. Such a loss …” Professor Slughorn shook his head morosely. “But I am comforted to see you are both being so well looked after in your grief — Mione, Evangeline — good on you, dears.”

It sounded admirably dutiful when he phrased it like that. In reality, all the pair were doing was preventing a very public murder from taking place. Evangeline smiled woodenly, her polished fingernails curling into Abraxas’ shoulder. Meanwhile, sweat was beginning to pool between Hermione’s and Tavaris’ palms.

“Where is Rosier? Creighton!” Professor Slughorn called out, glancing around. “Ah, there you are!”

He beckoned Creighton Rosier over and patted him on the back, bestowing a sorrowful smile upon him, Tavaris, and Abraxas in turn.

“The last of the Slug Club boys from those dear old days … so sad a sight … It pains me to see it, it truly does. Not once had I ever suspected so few of you would still be here today — why, I’d imagined you all attending *my* wake!”

“Not all of them are dead, sir,” Hermione reminded him. She glanced down at Tavaris, ignoring the way her throat tightened automatically. “Wasn’t Augustus Rookwood a year or two below you? Last I heard, he was still kicking.”

Tavaris, Abraxas, Creighton, and Evangeline all turned their heads to stare at her incredulously. Gaspar, on the other hand, sniggered into his firewhiskey.

Professor Slughorn practically squirmed with discomfort.

“Let us not delve into such troublesome waters, Mione, dear.”

Everyone’s stares turned on him instead.

“Er — pun unintended, of — of course. Please, forgive me.”

He drank deeply from his sherry.

“It is no matter, sir,” Evangeline reassured him, after an uncomfortable pause. “You are right that this is a time to remember him, especially in those days, when he was so young and full of life.”

“Yes!” said Professor Slughorn instantly, looking grateful to her. “I remember it as if it were only yesterday! An awfully *rowdy* boy, wasn’t he? And you, Tavaris, rambunctious little

scoundrel that you were, never did waste a second in riling him up."

"I am nothing if not punctual," said Tavaris.

Professor Slughorn laughed heartily. "Of course, I do not mean to group *you* in with this lot, Creighton. You were much better behaved when you began joining our little dinners," he said, in fond amusement. "I daresay if you'd been in the year above this lot rather than below, you would have been able to keep some of them in line."

Evidently, he was trying very, very hard to pretend there had not been one student among them who had kept the whole lot in line whenever it had suited him to do so.

"Geoffrey never could manage to turn his homework in on time." Professor Slughorn chuckled wistfully. "Though he was no worse than Av— er …" He trailed off awkwardly, shooting Gaspar a furtive glance.

And then he seemed to give up on trying to pretend. With a half-mumbled word of parting, he wandered off into the milling crowd.

"It's a mystery how he manages it, honestly," Creighton muttered lowly, watching him go. "I expect he's slept fitfully for years."

"He is extremely wilful in his denial," drawled Abraxas. He drained his firewhiskey in one large swig.

Indeed, thought Hermione, with a sigh. At this point in time, it remained far more beneficial to Professor Slughorn to stay on favourable terms with them all than it would be to admit his suspicions to himself. That would end the moment that Tavaris and Lucius were caught.

She half-wanted to whisper to them all, *Guess what? He voted for me.* But no one would understand the meaning, let alone significance, of this and she could not explain it so there was really no point.

"Do you recall Iphigenia's wake?" Creighton asked abruptly.

Evangeline's expression suggested that she did recall and was extremely displeased to be doing so.

"No," said Tavaris flatly.

"Well, of course, *you* don't, Nott," said Creighton, with a chuckle. "I seem to remember you vomiting into that vase over there." He gestured to an end table a metre away from them, where there sat a now very ominous-looking vase.

"I vaguely recall Elias pledging that however drunk Geoffrey got, he would ensure he was worse off," said Abraxas, "so that people would talk about *him* making a nuisance of himself rather than Geoffrey."

"Avery was unnaturally talented at ensuring he was worse off."

“Who’s Iphigenia?” asked Hermione curiously.

“Mulciber’s wife.”

“His *first* wife, mind you,” said Evangeline distastefully.

“She died when Angus was a baby,” added Gaspar.

“Withered away, really,” muttered Abraxas, without inflection. Lifting his empty tumbler, he added, “Evangeline, dear, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Hermione hoped she planned on watering down the refill.

As Evangeline cut through the room, they were joined by Lachlan Travers, who stopped next to Creighton and clapped him on the back.

“I’m afraid I had to escape my own son just now,” Lachlan said heavily. “He’s being atrociously disagreeable.”

“In what way?”

“He wishes to attend a Weird Sisters concert tonight.”

Over his shoulder, Hermione could spot Carden Travers standing with Lancaster Selwyn and Presleigh Parkinson by an ivory gramophone, which was softly emitting the sweet symphonies of Madam Bletchley. To no surprise, Carden was already looking her way.

“Not those leather-clad teenagers, surely,” said Abraxas, in dismay.

“It’s called *rock ‘n’ roll*, apparently.”

“What is it with today’s youth and their hatred of consonants?”

“Felix wanted tickets for him and his friends, you know,” said Creighton, with a reproving expression. “Thankfully, he’s stuck at school. Ena wrote Severus Snape to notify him that they might attempt to skulk out of the castle after dinner.”

“You went out of your way to spoil their fun? Come now, Creighton,” said Hermione, with purposeful condescension. “Didn’t you ever break the rules once in a while when you were in school?”

Abraxas sighed and began massaging his temples.

Tavaris squeezed her hand without looking at her. “You know I adore your wit, darling, but let’s save it for later, shall we?”

Lachlan’s eyes dropped to their hands and narrowed briefly.

A cloud of sickly-sweet smoke drifted into their midst then, announcing the presence of Paulus Parkinson a split-second before he pulled up, his daughter Preciosa with him. She

looked remarkably like Pansy would in her early-twenties, though with slightly more sultry makeup and a lot more decolletage.

“My condolences, gentlemen,” Paulus said, in a thick voice, removing his pipe from his mouth. He gave Hermione a nod. “Lady Nott, I hope you are well.”

“Decreasingly.”

“Are you feeling all right, Bedelia?” Preciosa asked gently, placing a hand on the back of Bedelia’s chair. “You look a little peaky.”

“I am quite fine, thank you,” said Bedelia primly, not looking at her.

“Nothing to concern yourself with, Preciosa,” said Gaspar lowly.

“No need to get in a strop, I was merely expressing some friendly concern.” Preciosa sighed lightly and glanced at Hermione with a slanted smile. “Always pleasant to see you, Lady Nott.”

“You as well.”

Hermione’s dislike of her grew every time she saw her, actually. Over the course of that one year she had spent at Hogwarts in this time, she had noticed several pairs of eyes following her around the castle; Preciosa Parkinson’s were the only pair she had not.

Speaking of eyes, she thought irritably, sensing another pair on her. Once again, she found herself meeting Carden Travers’ gaze across the room. He gestured covertly to the doors.

At least, he was consistent. She would give him that much. Admittedly, he had also proved himself to be a true well of information. If not for the intel he had given her at the Yule Gala, she would never have known to warn Madam Zabini, and Blaise would currently be living in the same house as a predator.

Hermione’s eyes darted from Tavaris, who was sighing into his tumbler, to Madam Zabini, who was still safely sequestered on the opposite side of the drawing room as him and Abraxas, as though knowing she ought to keep her distance. She had a firm hold on a severely bored-looking Blaise’s hand.

Wisely, “Auntie Dee” was nowhere to be found.

Hermione pursed her lips with indecision. Finally, she looked at Tavaris again and asked quietly, “Would you be alright if I excused myself for a minute?”

“I should think I shall survive, darling,” he muttered, immediately starting to wriggle his hand out of her grasp.

She held tighter and raised an eyebrow in warning.

Tavaris huffed and stopped trying to free himself, rolling his eyes in annoyance. “No one will *die* in your absence,” he said impatiently. “Go. Second door on the left at the top of the

stairs."

She nodded and let go. The second she stepped forward, Creighton, Lachlan, and Paulus all separated to clear her a path. She strode past them, slipped behind Tiberius Ogden without getting knocked in the head by his swinging tumbler of brandy, and made it out the doors and into the corridor. At once, she wiped the sweat-slick palm of her hand on her robes, her lip curling in disgust.

There was a low chuckle nearby. She turned her head.

"Have you grown weary of all the hand-holding?" Lancaster Selwyn asked her, in amusement.

Beside him, Lucius wrinkled his nose and Presleigh Parkinson snorted, two streams of purplish smoke issuing from his nostrils. He was pulling on a pipe not unlike his father's.

"Let us not pretend it is any of your business, Mr Selwyn," said Hermione frostily, before turning down the corridor in the direction of the foyer. She climbed the old, *creaking* wooden stairs up to the first floor, the landing of which was thankfully unoccupied.

She turned the silver doorknob of the second door on the left and opened it to reveal a colourfully-tiled bathroom. It was lit by a singular burning chamberstick, casting just enough light for her to see the figure leaning back against the marble sink opposite, a large mirror of tarnished glass looming behind him and doubling his shadowy silhouette.

Hermione scoffed softly, not letting go of the doorknob.

"Well, aren't you terribly presumptuous?"

"I merely thought to avoid being happened upon," said Carden.

At the reminder, she glanced back at the landing behind her, still empty of any of the guests. Just as her gaze was sliding back to him, however, it caught on a uniquely toady someone who happened to be starting up the stairs that very moment.

"Shit," she muttered, with feeling, and she slipped quickly into the bathroom before Umbridge spotted her. She shut the door and leaned back against it, mindful of moving no further into the room.

"You had a hand in this, didn't you?" said Carden, in a low voice.

"A hand in what?"

He gave her an inexplicably pointed smirk, illuminated by the flickering flame beside him.

"Don't play coy, Lady Mione," he murmured, with relish. "I fill you in on why Mulciber oughtn't be coming round your house, and just a few weeks later, it has been ensured that he never will again."

Hermione tilted her head slightly, feigning bemusement.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

Just then, the doorknob started to turn; she turned the lock hastily. There was a soft grumbling on the other side of the door, followed by a short, precise rapping.

“Occupied!” Carden shouted. “Try upstairs! Seventh door on the right!”

“Why, thank you, sir!” they heard Umbridge reply.

Once her *clicking* footfalls had faded away, Carden admitted, “There is no seventh door on the right.”

Good.

“It’s all right, you know,” he carried on after a moment, lowering his voice once more. “I already said I would keep your secrets, didn’t I? I’m merely grateful I could prove my usefulness.”

“Is that what you’re trying out for, then?” asked Hermione, still not releasing the doorknob. “A position of usefulness.”

His blue eyes gleamed brazenly in the candlelight.

“I do have a great many uses,” he said. “Plus, two good legs.”

Her mouth fell open in astonishment.

“You are quite possibly the most forward man I have ever met.”

“Don’t pretend it bothers you. I’ve been paying attention.”

“You have, haven’t you?” she murmured.

Carden grinned toothily, running his front teeth along his bottom lip. He pushed off the sink slowly.

“I can still picture you that day at the Nott Estate, you know, when you returned with the Dark Lord to duel the others,” he said, starting to inch across the tiled floor toward her. “I remember every detail of how you looked emerging from the treeline: barefoot in a white dress, covered in blood and dirt … Even from a distance, I could tell you were limping … your arms and legs were all scraped up, and your face, your chest … and yet, you were wearing the most glorious grin. For a moment, I was suspended in disbelief, so unthinkable it’d been to me that you could have beaten them all single-handedly … but then you handed their wands over to Nott, and you said, ‘I win.’”

He had stopped just inches away from her, so close she could feel his breath on her face. He gave his head an almost dreamy shake.

“It was the single most attractive thing I’ve ever seen in my life.”

Hermione wished sorely that his eyes had been a different colour, or at least a darker shade of blue, rather than bright like Ron's. It would have made them easier to look away from, as he placed one hand on the door beside her head, the other grazing her hip, and leaned in closer.

And for a single terrible second, she considered it.

Then she unlocked the door. At the *click*, Carden straightened up.

She made her lips twitch, like she might have been amused by him and supressing a laugh, and then she slipped out the door and back downstairs to the drawing room to retake Tavaris' hand.

True to his word, no one had died in her absence. Nevertheless, her heart was racing as though someone were about to, and her skin felt uncomfortably hot beneath her clothes. When Carden returned to the drawing room, she avoided his gaze.

It was less than an hour later that she and Tavaris left, joined by Abraxas. She did not let go of Tavaris' hand again until they had entered the front hall and Goppy had come to take their cloaks.

At once, Tavaris and Abraxas made for the sitting room. Hermione followed only as far as the threshold, just to catch a glimpse of them together on the sofa in an otherwise empty room. Gazing at the pair, she thought to herself idly, *And then there were two* ...

She turned away and went upstairs to check on Theodore.

A short while later, as Hermione was changing out of her funeral clothes, a folded square of parchment fell out of one of her pockets and landed softly on the mocha carpet at her feet.

She paused, eyeing the parchment warily.

She bent down to pick up, glanced at each closed door in turn, and unfolded it to reveal a short, even script. The handwriting was not one that she recognised, but its owner was all too obvious to her.

Since you like secrets, here is a fun one, an old one, and a good one: Garfield Goyle regularly pays for the pleasure of a young lady's company, and between the two of them, he is not the one wielding the riding crop; Wymond Selwyn used to shag Alphard Black back in the day and his wife still does not know; and there is a ballerina at the Bard Theatre whose Soho flat is paid for by Abraxas Malfoy.

She dropped down heavily on her bed. Her eyes skimmed the note a second time, then a third, as a wide, disbelieving grin spread across her face.

Some men bought roses; others picked out a box of chocolates. But Carden Travers had slipped her a pocketful of blackmail.

Hermione fell back onto the mattress with a breathy laugh, still clutching the note. She stared up at the ceiling and pressed her fingertips to her grinning lips. As those old, familiar feelings crept up on her once more, her stomach gave a tight twist of guilt, shame slackening her smile.

She attempted to reason with herself.

It was wholly irrelevant if her heart raced, or her skin flushed. There was no reason her skin should crawl, she thought, to reassure herself over the fact that her skin was not crawling. It was not her fault. None of these feelings had anything to do with Carden Travers himself.

So he had bright blue eyes that gleamed brighter still in the light, like Ron; a broad line of sturdy shoulders, like Ron; a freckled, boyish face, like Ron; an easy, impish grin, like Ron; a lively spirit and cheeky commentary, like Ron — so what? Ron was not an option anymore, and Carden Travers would never be a replacement. There never would be a replacement.

Besides, she did not want him; she just wanted, and he happened to be making quite the dedicated effort to present himself as an optimal outlet for that want.

But this was not the whole truth. It was not a mere matter of want, unprescribed to any specific individual in her temporal proximity. It had not been in many months.

It was, in fact, very specific.

There was no faceless figure in the dark, when Hermione imagined being back in that bathroom, beginning to trace her bottom lip with her fingertip, her gaze growing distant and the ceiling blurring into one great shadow above her. Dazedly, she imagined gazing into the smoky reflection of that mirror, watching him come into the light behind her, his face awash in the warm illumination of that flickering flame, all that lay behind him bathed in sightless, insignificant shadow. She could almost see the tarnished glass fogging up under hot, fanning breath, could almost feel the cool marble of the basin under the palms of her hands, her fingers curling round the rim for something to hold on to.

Her mouth was hanging partly open, watering. She swallowed, blinking hard, and turned her head to glance at the clock; it was very nearly dinnertime. Startled, she realised that over an hour had passed whilst she had sprawled there, motionless, with her legs dangling off the side of the bed; over an hour spent not thinking but, rather, traipsing through a glen of thoughts she had already had.

She let out a long breath and threaded her fingers through her hair. She returned her gaze to the ceiling, wide-eyed in some combination of disbelief, overwhelm, and another emotion that she could not quite put her finger on. Whatever it was, she was dizzy with it.

What was it she had told him once? She would, if she could?

In the case of this one thing, Hermione realised that she could. Perhaps, then, if she were only brave enough, she would.

Her gaze found the Chudley Cannons poster on the wall.

Never again, she reminded herself, her heart squeezing painfully in her chest. Over six years had passed for her since she had seen Ron last, and no matter how many years, months, or days were still to come, she would never see him again, never feel the warmth and security of his embrace. Surely, then, it would be all right to feel someone else's, at least once more before she died.

That Saturday, Hermione did not begin her morning with a visit to Gringotts Bank. She went straight to the flat above Jameson's pub and held down on the button for the intercom, her heart racing faster than it had since the first time she had pressed it, just over three years ago.

"Remus?" she said. "I'm here."

Within a minute, she heard him padding down the stairs, and then the chipped, red front door was opening to reveal Remus' surprised face. It was so alike the first time he had opened this door to her that Hermione nearly laughed; just like then, his sandy hair was still bedraggled, and he was in nothing but his pants and socks, with a jumper thrown over top.

"Hello," he said, seeming mildly discombobulated. "Sorry. I hadn't known to expect you till later. What — what time is it?"

"Did I wake you?" Hermione asked, in amusement.

"No, I was just finishing breakfast — sorry, come in," he added hastily, stepping aside. He bent slightly to accept her kiss on the cheek before closing and locking the door behind her.

The series of three sharp *clicks*, this time, gave her an inexplicable rush of adrenaline. Oddly invigorated, she started up the narrow stairs, sliding her hands along the white stucco walls. The steps *creaked* beneath her, and again, beneath him, as he followed close behind.

Music emitted from the open door of the flat; a lively rumbling that Hermione recognised at once as belonging to his The English Beat record: *I Just Can't Stop It*. He must have been listening whilst he ate breakfast. She wondered briefly if he did that every morning, perhaps to fill the quiet, so it would feel a little less like eating alone.

The lyrics reached her ears just as she entered the flat, shrugging off her coat.

"*Mirror in the bathroom, please talk free*

The door is locked, just you and me ..."

She paused to laugh incredulously.

"Just give me a moment, I'll be with you shortly," Remus muttered, slipping past her down the hallway as she started on removing her boots. He turned left into the kitchen, moving quickly. A moment later, she could make out the sound of running water in the bathroom as he scrambled to brush his teeth.

Laughing to herself again, Hermione moved further into the flat, sliding along the floorboards in her knee socks, and dropped herself onto the old, discoloured sofa, crossing one leg over the other. She waited, fiddling with the hem of her tartan skirt. After a minute,

she heard him emerge from the bathroom. He began puttering about the kitchen, cupboards opening and closing.

“Shall I put the kettle on?” he shouted to her over the music.

“Don’t bother!” she shouted back.

“Right,” he muttered to himself, coming back into the living area. He rounded the sofa, patting the sides of his pants as though reminding himself, and continued toward the bedroom. “Trousers …”

“That could prove rather counterproductive.”

Remus froze. From the doorway, he turned slowly to stare at her.

“Pardon me?” he said, in a very high voice.

Hermione held his gaze, hoping she seemed some semblance of calm. In truth, her insides were a squirming mess, and her chest felt as though it were bared under the overheated gaze of a scorching, summer sun. She patted the cushion next to her.

“Sit with me, will you?”

Remus looked at the sofa as though he had never seen it before.

“So that’s a — er — no to the trousers, then?”

“Would you like to go put on trousers?”

“Not particularly, now you’ve said that,” he said honestly, his voice still quite high.

For a moment longer, he stared at her, his eyes very wide, before his body seemed to propel him forward; he pushed off the doorframe and rounded the coffee table to sit down beside her on the sofa, wincing when his knees cracked. He cleared his throat.

Hermione took one of his hands into both of her own and drew it onto her lap. She played idly with his fingers for a minute as she mustered up the courage. The whole time, he did not dare move a single muscle.

“Remus,” she said finally, her eyes flitting back up to his face, “do you remember when you asked if I would let you kiss me?”

His gaze was steady. He faced her head on, looking undaunted, strong, but she could feel the rapidness of his pulse where her fingertips grazed his wrist.

“I do,” he said.

“If I —” She hesitated. Mouth dry, she licked her lips.

Remus waited patiently, with his racing heart.

“If I told you that I would say yes … would you ask me again?”

He inhaled deeply, his chest expanding with it. For a while, he did not reply, merely studied her face in silence. She wondered what he saw there; she hoped bravery.

“Mione,” he said at last, “if I were to kiss you right now, would you let me?”

She searched his eyes, that sage-green she had once nearly forgotten all about, and still, found only steadiness.

Bravery.

“Yes.”

Neither one of them moved straight away. Remus seemed to hesitate, as if trying to decide whether that “Yes” had meant simply “Yes” or “Yes, now.” But his gaze did not waver, and nor did Hermione’s.

Slowly, he shifted to face her better. Slower still, he lifted his free hand to cup her cheek. Wetting his lips, he brought his face closer, tilted her own up toward him, and searched her eyes one last time.

For a second more, merely their breath mingled, minty and fresh, all other sounds muffling in comparison, and then, finally, she was accepting that kiss of his.

Soft, warm, gentle, caressing — these were the words that best described the kiss itself. But the feeling of being treated as something so fragile, and to be so in recognition of how very breakable she was, without the intention of breaking her, was indescribable.

And when, in a matter of seconds, he pulled away to rest his forehead against her own, the pad of his thumb stroking her cheekbone, all Hermione wanted was more of it.

This time, she was the one twisting to face him; this time, she was the one leaning forward; this time, he was the one surging up into it; and this time, in a matter of seconds, it did not end, because in a matter of seconds, she had him on his back.

“Fuck,” he breathed on a shocked inhale, as her mouth drifted down to his neck. His hand slipped past her cheek into her hair, fingers curling against her scalp. “Mione —”

“Shut up, Remus.”

He let out a shaky, startled laugh.

“Gladly.”

Soon, soft became unsatisfactory; warm, an understatement; gentle, a tease; and caressing, far too restrained for her liking.

Hermione had forgotten this feeling, how all-consuming it had the power to become, any tangible memory of it fading away with time. Now that she was feeling it once more, this

sinking pleasure and steady drowning of her senses, she had no intention of stopping unless he asked her to.

She very seriously doubted that Remus would ask her to.

Especially not once he had begun to gasp into her mouth, his body restless beneath her, seeming to struggle with indecision over whether to lie prone or dig his heels into the sofa cushions and surge up against her. Both his hands were running through her hair now, holding it out of the way, fisting and gentling and fisting again, as though he could not believe his luck, and as though, maybe, he was fearful of making the wrong move and losing it. A kind of desperate hesitancy, since she had not yet drawn the line, thus leaving him at a loss as to how to avoid crossing it.

So, Hermione drew him one.

She sat up, panting slightly astride him, untucked her blouse, and began unbuttoning it. He watched breathlessly, his eyes still wide and disbelieving and his hands falling to his sides, waiting, unsure where to put them in the meantime.

On the third button, she stilled briefly, realising what she was about to reveal. But Remus had no magical eye; he would never see this same scar on Hermione Granger, and thus would never know to connect it back to Mione Nott. He was not suspicious the way Moody was; if he would ever hear word of a scar, he would think, at most, that Dolohov must have been the one to give it to Mione Nott, too.

Remus' gaze had grown worried in the time it took her to weigh the odds. He opened his mouth to speak —

She shook her head and undid another button.

"Mione," he said, regardless, reaching out to still her hand himself. He gazed up at her seriously. "You haven't got to do this, you know. We can stop."

"And if I don't want to stop?" she asked.

He blinked.

"Right," he said, mostly to himself, his voice hoarse. He nodded jerkily. "That's fine, too."

His hand fell away, and she unbuttoned the rest. Letting the blouse hang open from her shoulders, she gave his jumper a tug; he sat up to wrestle it off and flung it carelessly onto the floor.

Then he paused.

"Why don't you take that shirt off so I can have a turn gawking at some scars, too?" said Hermione.

Abashed, his eyes darted away.

“You needn’t really, Remus,” she said, kinder, when he didn’t respond. “Not if you don’t want to.”

With a sigh, he closed his eyes and rested his head on her shoulder. She threaded her fingers through his hair and held him there, sighing as well.

“It’s not a particularly pleasant sight,” he admitted.

“They’re scars, Remus,” she said baldly. “They’re not supposed to be pleasant to look at.”

She felt his eyelashes brush her collarbone, fluttering, and she knew he had opened his eyes.

“Not the scars themselves, no,” he murmured, after a long moment, his voice partly muffled against her skin. “But as for the *rest* …”

Hermione scoffed, half-incredulous and half-amused. She gave his shoulders a small shove, knocking him back onto the sofa cushions and inciting a huff of laughter. She lowered herself over him once more.

This time, his hands skimmed across skin, leading a scorching, exploratory trail along her spine, round her waist, gripping it tightly, dragging it towards himself with a soft groan against her lips, and up her sides, finally, to where he had undoubtedly wanted his hands to be the second that she had started on that first button of her blouse.

She sighed into his mouth, her own hands at the hem of his shirt, fingers curling into the waistband of his pants.

He gave her an eager nod.

It was only when *Rough Rider* started up, with jarring irony, that Hermione registered the record-player had not stopped spinning.

“*She was a rough rider*

A cool stroker

A strong whiner

I had a hard night ...”

A breathy laugh escaped her, making it a challenge to purse her lips and spit into her hand. She hoped Remus did not think she was laughing at him, as she slid her hand down the front of his pants, because there was really nothing to laugh about.

A clasp was tugged lightly in askance. She drew back from his face, open-mouthed at his jaw, and nodded. Her brasserie was, in seconds, left dangling loosely from her chest, straps stuck at the shoulders of her blouse, the air cool but his hands calloused and warmed from her skin, overheating, alight with a buzz of energy, fingers exploring further, and eventually, lower, in askance again at her thigh, her skirt rucked up along it.

“Please,” she exhaled into his ear, biting gently at his earlobe.

So higher his fingers trailed, a careful, tingling tip-toeing up the inside of her thigh, an oversensitive stretch of soft skin, and higher still.

A moan muffled by his jaw; a rasping breath fanning across her cheekbone. Her forehead came to press into the arm of the sofa behind his head, her mouth open and gasping wetly at the fabric, her eyes rolling back. His hair dusted the side of her face as he brought his mouth to her neck, returning another favour with relish, never lingering in one spot too long, never bearing teeth, lest he left a mark.

And as breath grew heavier, hips jerked, and legs seized and squirmed with restless desire, heels digging into the cushions and toes curling, she had to get it out, make her intentions clear, and on another gasp, she managed, “Contraceptive.”

“Right,” Remus panted, sounding almost hysteric, overwhelmed. “I believe I have — *ah* — but — are the expiry dates on condoms legitimate?”

“*Yes*,” she groaned emphatically.

“*Mm*. That’s a — that’s a shame. Potion?”

“Not on it.”

“Er — I could just pull —”

“That is *not* a contraceptive,” she interrupted, with finality.

His breath left him in a gust.

“Right,” he said again, and then, more determined, “*right*.”

He withdrew his hands, placed them on her hips to still her, and heaved himself upright. His face and neck were flushed, pale skin now blotchy and pink. Beneath the corner of his jaw, a deepening, reddish mark had already made itself known. She winced. *Oops.*

“This is easily remedied. Shift it,” he said, patting her hip lightly, and once she had, he staggered up from the sofa.

Quicker than she had seen him do almost anything, Remus had adjusted himself, dashed into his bedroom, and come out struggling into a pair of trousers, hopping in place on one foot. Just as speedily, he swiped his worn, brown leather wallet off the desk, stepped over his jumper on the floor to get to the hallway, shoved his feet into his boots, not bothering to lace them up, and wrenched open the door.

“Sixty seconds — count them!”

Hermione did not.

She sat back on her heels and ran a hand through her tangled hair. She waited, catching her breath.

And she waited too long — long enough to stop and think.

It came, the guilt. Of course, it did.

It was not as all-consuming as she had expected. Rather, it was a downward drag, a slow muting of sensation, the death of that tingling. Because no one else's hands had been on her like that before, no one else's fingers, no one else's skin; no one else but Ron.

Except this was not quite true, was it?

Ron's hands were merely the ones she remembered.

A downward drag, the guilt, and so, too, was this thought. She sank back into the sofa, slanting until her head hit the cushions, and curled on her side, holding her blouse closed beneath the fold of her arms, skin chilled.

To the forefront of her mind came a memory of lying on another sofa, in another room, on another day, listening not to music but to conversation, one centred around herself, yet in which she had been allowed no involvement.

"The next time Severus is here, Tavaris, you should ask him to look into the side-effects of consuming Sleeping Draughts during pregnancy."

"A fine idea, my Lord. I've been abstaining these past few months because I hadn't wished to take the risk."

"Why bother with a Sleeping Draught at all?"

"Geoffrey, if she were actually conscious, she would likely concuss herself trying to fight him off. Pregnant, and she could wind up killing his heir."

"Stunning Spell, then?"

"Don't be daft."

"Even a mildly *powerful Stunning Spell could make an elderly witch's heart stop. What do you suppose it would do to a pregnant one?"*

A brainstorming session, of sorts, between six men over drinks.

If she let her eyes go unfocused, Hermione could almost see them: the buttons of his waistcoat. Always in her direct line of sight, always the last thing she had seen.

A new track had started up, as familiar as the last.

"*And if you like it or not*

I still control you,

I tell you what to think and what to do …"

She laid there numbly, unmoving, until Remus returned.

Even at the distant *slam* of the front door below and the racing of feet on the stairs, she did not stir, nor did she sit up when the door to the flat was flung open and just as hastily shut. He was out of breath, by the sound of it, as though he had actually sprinted the whole way to the corner shop across the street and back. The fellow behind the counter was probably still laughing at the sight he had made.

Hermione waited, staring blindly at the whirling movement of the record-player, for him to come to a halt at the end of the sofa.

"I'm sor—"

But she need not have said anything, because Remus cut her off, muttering angrily, "For Christ's sake, Mione, of all the things you think you need to apologise for, this *cannot* become one of them." Thrown without care, the box of condoms landed roughly on the coffee table and skidded off the edge onto the floor.

The silence between them stretched, even as the record spun on. Remus seemed to be taking a minute to catch his breath. Once he had, he clambered onto the sofa behind her and wrapped an arm around her to hold her to his chest, chasing away some of the chill.

"It's fine, all right?" he said, still sounding agitated. "All right?"

Hermione gave a tiny nod. She both heard and felt him sigh. He laid a kiss on her temple before resting his head alongside her own.

"It's fine," he repeated, softer.

"OK," she mumbled. Her eyes prickled at the corners, threatening tears, so she closed them.

For a long while, neither of them said anything. She merely breathed, feeling him breathing behind her. She held onto the arm around her, finding and running her thumb over one of its scars, reassuring herself whose arm it was.

"I don't even remember any of it," she confessed, after a time. "How can it still affect me so much if I can't even remember any of it?"

"How do you mean?" Remus asked, the frown audible in his voice.

"I … I took Sleeping Draughts."

He grew very still, his arm tensing around her.

"Every time?"

“Every time.”

“But — but past tense?”

“Well, yes,” she muttered, “not since Theodore —”

Remus let out a shuddering sigh of relief.

Frowning, Hermione shifted under his arm, turning onto her back so that she could see his face. “Did you think —?”

“Of course, I fucking thought!” he blurted. He propped himself up on his elbow and looked down at her incredulously. “Mione, have you never noticed that every time he’s travelling, you *don’t* nod off while you’re here? And then as soon as he’s back, it takes about ten minutes after sitting down before I look over to find you’re already fast asleep. It’s because you feel safe here, I recognise that, and I am *infinitely* grateful that you do, but every time, it just reminds me that you don’t feel safe enough to sleep *there*.”

“I do sleep there,” she said, feeling suddenly very small. “Just not always very well.”

“And why do you suppose that is?”

She opened her mouth to speak but no sound came out. Huffing in frustration, she broke his gaze and pulled at her blouse uncomfortably. Without a word, Remus began working his way down it with one hand, refastening the buttons. She ignored the fact that her brasserie remained unclasped beneath her back.

“I have my own room, you know,” she told him, watching his expression. “I’m left alone there, normally. It depends on whether … well …” She swallowed. “I try not to think about it. Most of the time, I don’t think about it at all. It’s easier that way.”

“Easier?” he repeated dubiously.

“Less difficult,” she amended softly.

Remus gazed at her oddly, a small furrow between his brows.

“Aren’t you ever furious?” he asked.

“You’ve seen me furious.”

“Not about this.”

“Well, I … I suppose I haven’t given myself the chance,” said Hermione, shifting tensely. She picked up his hand and focused on that, playing with his fingers again. “There has always been plenty more to be furious about. This has never felt all that significant, in comparison. I mean, it only concerns me, doesn’t it? And I’m still here. I’m still alive.”

“Just because it only concerns you does not mean it is not significant,” Remus told her, and although he said it gently, it still landed like a tonne of concrete on her chest. “This doesn’t

need to be brushed off as nothing simply because it has not resulted in anyone's death. I'm still alive, aren't I, and I suspect I could tell you some things that you would be hard-pressed to brush off as not as important."

"That's —"

"Don't say 'different.'"

"I wasn't —"

"Yes, you were."

Hermione scoffed.

"Letting myself be furious about this," she began, very intently, "would entail thinking about it. And I do not know if I am willing to do that to myself."

"But, Mione, don't you realise?" said Remus, sighing sadly. "You're already thinking about it."

She turned her head away from him. Prickling heat returned to press behind her eyes, as something tight and painful rose in her throat.

And she thought about the fact that, in all her careful filing of information, there was one crime that she had not included. This one, she knew well; this one came with living, breathing proof. Why had she not thought to include it in the evidence for Harry?

Perhaps it was because it was not a crime, yet. She wondered if Remus knew this. Still looking away from him, she said, "Nothing can be done about it, you know — even if I did speak up. Vance asked about it when Tavaris was being investigated. I believe she and Moody thought it would help support their case if they could prove … I mean, considering the kidnapping … but on its own … I was already married to him."

"I don't follow," said Remus apprehensively.

Hermione gave a weak, hollow laugh.

"Remus, it's legal."

There was a long silence.

"I don't understand," Remus said finally, but if this were true, his voice would not have trembled. "You mean, *marital* —?"

"Yes," she interrupted quickly.

"It's *legal*."

"Entirely."

And it would remain so until 1992, in the Muggle part of the UK. As always, the wizarding world took several years, at least, to catch up.

Would it even count in a contemporary court, Hermione wondered, if it had occurred before the act was criminalised? She did not know if there was any precedent. Was it not worth it to try, though? Undoubtedly, Harry would fight to create precedent on her behalf. An overwhelming portion of the Wizengamot would vote against it purely out of spite, she knew, because it was her. But, because of her, that same overwhelming portion of the Wizengamot would have just lost their seats. So why had she not included it in the evidence?

Had she truly managed to convince herself that this crime was somehow lesser? Somehow unimportant?

When had she started believing everyone deserved justice but her?

"Did you know," she started, after several minutes in which Remus fumed silently behind her, "that the human brain does not reach full development until the age of twenty-five?"

"Does it?" he mumbled obligingly. His voice still trembled, so tight it was with anger.

She nodded shortly. "The frontal lobe is the last to finish forming. It's the part of the brain responsible for emotion, movement, personality, language, as well as higher executive functioning," she explained, in a thin, straining voice, "which refers to the capacity of one's cognitive skills, such as judgement, impulse control, decision-making, problem-solving, planning and organisation … and memory."

"Am I to understand that we only have the capacity to become responsible members of society at the age of twenty-five?" Remus sounded partly amused, but mostly just bitter.

He was thinking about James.

Hermione nodded again.

"There have been studies showing that —" she hesitated, biting down on her cheek, "— that *trauma*, particularly whilst the brain is still developing, may have severe effects on the formation of the frontal lobe. There was something about — about grey matter and … erm … I don't know, I read about it a long time ago. I can't quite remember."

She resumed fidgeting with his hand, left laying loosely on her stomach. Remus let her without comment.

"So, this is your brain," he sighed. "A finished product."

"I think —" Hermione's voice broke. "*I think* —"

Remus squeezed her hand tightly, and just like that, an onslaught of tears came barrelling forth to roll down her cheeks. Her face crumpled.

"*It's not the same brain as before*," she whispered weakly.

And as though the last twig of a dam had been snapped, she was sobbing so hard that no air filled her lungs, her breath blown too far way to catch, even for a second. He laid back down to draw her into his arms once more, holding her tighter as she began to shake.

"Th—they — *they changed my brain*!" she cried into his chest. "*Warped* it — like it's — like it's not even *mine* anymore … *My brain*! *It was the only thing I h—had left that still belonged to me* … the only part of me th—" her breath hitched, "—they couldn't *touch* …"

Remus did not say anything. He only buried his face in her hair and held her tighter still, as though by doing so, he could prevent all the pieces of her from falling apart. But what help was that when those pieces had already been rearranged?

Once, she had fought, but the Dark Lord had made her freeze under his gaze, a shade of red akin to spilt blood iced over on the January ground. Once, she had used her voice, but Tavaris had shut her mouth, the cool edge of his white-gold signet ring digging into the side of her jaw. Once, it had been safe to sleep in her own bed, until one of them had pulled up a chair, and the other had crawled under the sheets with her.

There was a name for it, this crime; a name Hermione could not think, let alone speak. Was it fear of this name that had stopped her? It seemed pathetic that this should be the case.

After all, fear of a name only increased fear of the thing itself.

On weak legs, Hermione dragged herself to Gringotts Bank late that afternoon. Her hands trembled as she handed her wand over for inspection at the counter. Her stomach churned the whole tumultuous ride down to the vault; bile was choked back and burned her throat. Her heart was frantic. Her skin was flushed. Her muscles protested.

Her body did not want to do this.

Shaking, she reached for a phial and picked up her wand.

Yet, the hardest part of withdrawing each memory from her head turned out not to be the act of reliving them; the hardest part was imagining Harry standing there in every scene, witnessing her live them.

Altogether, Hermione gathered them, every last one. From a champagne toast to the many more times that had followed it, sat on her bed as he stood silently in front of her, waiting for her to swallow it down. In her direct line of sight, the silver, white, gold, copper, bronze, black buttons of his grey, black, navy, pinstripe waistcoat worn beneath his parted grey, black, navy, pinstripe robes, Wizengamot robes, dress robes — she could never meet his gaze. She waited instead for the buttons to blur and the room to blacken. The taste of the Sleeping Draught touched the tip of her tongue even now.

The sharp pain of that first morning shot through her, again; the silken sheets slipped coolly against her bare skin, again; she awoke on her back, again; she awoke on her front, again; and she awoke sprawled, again, and again, and again.

For the first time, Hermione counted.

And on the paper label, cringing at each curve and each point of each letter, she wrote shortly: *My Rape, 41 Counts.*

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I waited until Hermione's brain was fully developed again for her to come up with a revenge scheme. And the fact that, at this time, marital rape was legal is an extra punch to the gut that I had to include, so please forgive me.

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